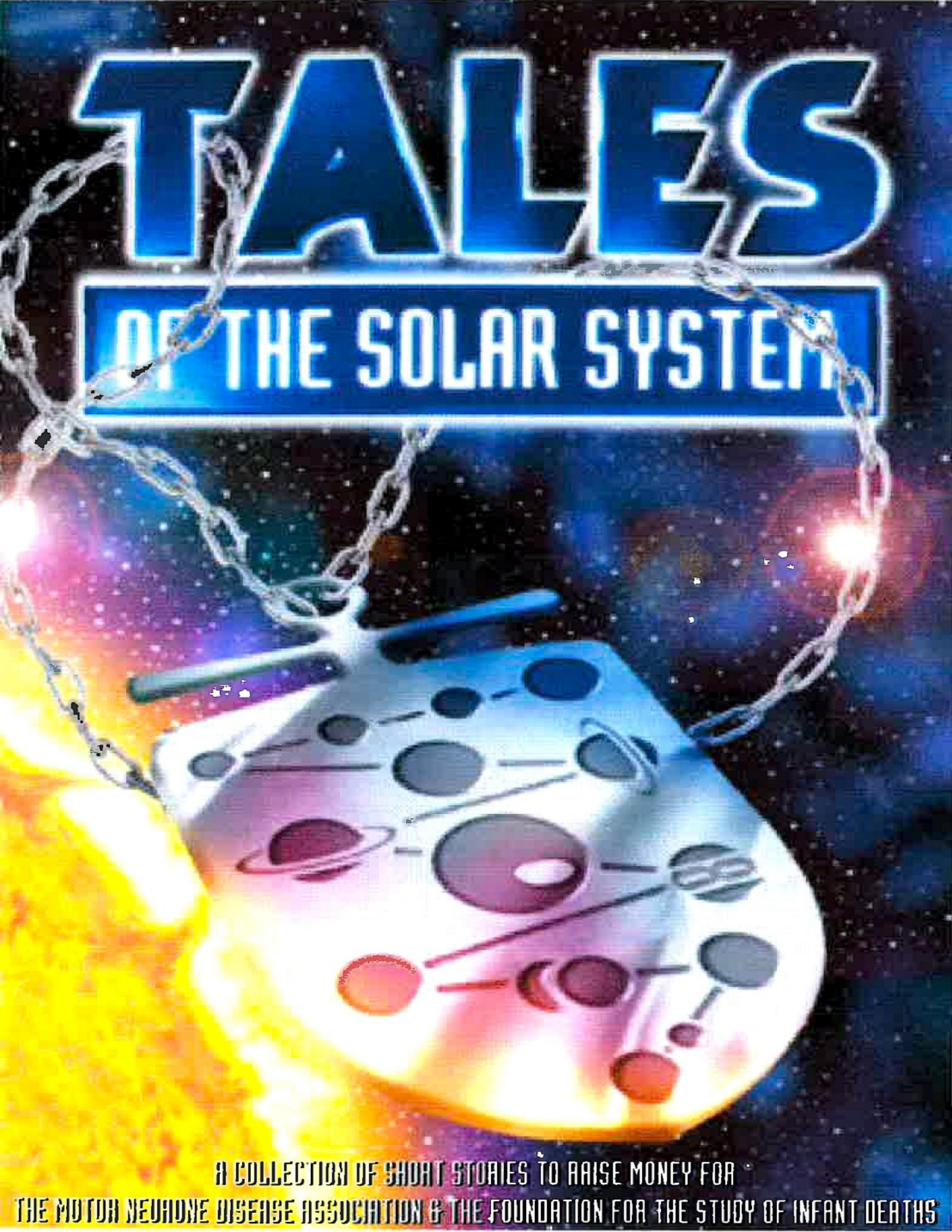
TALES
OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES TO RAISE MONEY FOR
THE MOTOR NEURONE DISEASE ASSOCIATION & THE FOUNDATION FOR THE STUDY OF INFANT DEATHS

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YOU HAVE BEEN READING…

TALES
OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

Edited by D Paul Griggs

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MERCURY

THE ALL by IAN J. CARTER

“Never be a hero son They die in the dark

That was what his mother had told him in the slums of New Romford. And he had always believed his mother. Right up until they took her away to the arena. She had promised that she would come back but the tears streaked down her face like liquid lies She had spent her life trying not to be a hero, not to buck the system. And yet they still came for her. Since then he had lived the contradiction — keep your head down, don’t be a hero and hope they don’t come for you anyway. But come for him they had.

Had it not been for the Underground he would have died, another nameless corpse in the dank back alleys of New Romford. The Underground turned out to be the safest place — the Hunt never found them, they always stayed one step ahead.

Exactly the place to be for a dedicated coward. Except now, fate had chosen him to be a hero. One ordinary’ night the Hunt had crashed into their base and decimated them They had thought they were clever, hidden It turned out that the Guardians knew where they were all the time and chose to keep it that way, pretending not to know so that they could keep the rebels under supervision. But when the Device had fallen into the hands of the Underground, the Guardians had chosen to act So they sent in the Hunt. And now Silak had to play hero. The last of the Underground, on the run with the salvation of the Mercury colony stuffed inside his tunic. And the bitch of it all was no one would ever know of the sacrifices he and the others had made for them Silak touched the lumpy device secured inside

his tunic. Good, still there. Poking his head out of the ventilation shaft, he peered into the gloom of the corridor. The Hunt should be far away by now. Time to make a move. Silak lowered himself.

He had not taken three steps before the shrill sound of the Hunt's bugle punctured the still air.

Shit.

He heard the clatter of leather booted Huntsmen approaching him. He caught a glimpse of immaculate blood red hunting jackets, green lumpy flesh, jodhpurs and hats. Silak sprinted away from them, breath heaving in his chest.

Shit, shit, shit.

He rounded a corner at speed and collided heavily with a young woman. She squealed as they fell to the floor.

"Can we help you?" Silak flinched instinctively as a man wearing a multi-coloured jacked leaned down toward him, hand extended. This was it, Silak knew. His lead of a few precious seconds had evaporated. Whatever slim chance he had had was now gone and with it the future of the colony. He looked into the eyes of the woman and prayed she could be trusted. "Please." he said through panting breath. "Please, you must take this. Give it to Billran. Don't let them have it or we're all dead." The woman took the device, looking at her companion uncertainly. The Hunt rounded the corner.

"Peri run" the multi-coloured man shouted. She hadn't argued. She bolted around the comer and out of sight. The lead Hunter stepped forward and brought his riding crop down. Silak saw a blinding white light as a searing pain screamed across his head. He heard a distinctive crack as darkness replaced the light. He felt his eyes roll up in their sockets. As if from a great distance he heard the sound of blaster fire and felt his awareness float. This is it, he thought.

As he lay dying in the dark corridor, Silak was comforted by his mother's warmth. He allowed her to lift him to the Hall of Heroes.

"A Doctor eh? And just what exactly are you are Doctor of?" asked First Guardian Ide.

The Doctor put his feet up on the bare table and leaned back until his chair rested on its two rear legs. He placed his hands behind his head. "What have you got?" he said, with as much insolence as he could muster.

Ide smiled thinly, his sharp features shrouded in sinister shadows cast by the dim light of the interrogation cell. “What were you doing in New Romford?”

“Sightseeing.”

“Sightseeing. Amongst the scum and the slime of New Romford? I think not. I think that you and your companion were waiting for a delivery from your associates in the Underground.”

The Doctor frowned. He was losing patience with this so-called interrogation. How many times must he play this puerile game? “Look, wouldn’t it waste less time if you just wrote down whatever it is you wish to accuse me of? Then you can torture me into signing it and we can both be on our way? Yes?”

“Torture? My dear Doctor there’s no need for that.” Ide’s smile became the incarnation of smarm, his voice conciliatory’, “Most people are perfectly happy living their lives as free colonists of Mercury.”

“The man you had killed in the corridor looked neither happy nor free. In addition to which, I have yet to encounter a happy society which requires an Underground movement.”

Ide’s thin lips lost their pretence of a smile. This was, considered the Doctor, a good thing. Lips like that were not meant to smile. “Who are your associates in the Underground?”

The Doctor sighed. “Frodo.”

Ide’s virtual keyboard winked into existence before him and he quickly entered the name. “Continue”

“Frodo, Bilbo Baggins and Sam. Strictly speaking they’re not really underground creatures. But they do live in barrows, which are partly subterranean.”

Ide slammed his fist down onto the table. “Doctor don’t waste my time! Where is the girl you were with?”

“Wish I knew.”

“Where was she to take the device?”

“What device?”

Ide stood slowly and moved around the desk to stand next to the Doctor. Here we go, thought the Time Lord. Here comes the physical stuff. The Doctor rocked slowly on the chair and smiled sweetly at his captor. “Doctor, let me clarify things for you. I have been charged with recovering

the device and I shall do so," he leaned forward until his face was inches from the Doctor's, "Whatever it takes."

"Alright, I'll tell you where I'm from. I am a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey in the constellation of Kasterborous." Hah, that always threw them. Questions about his sanity were certain to be next on the agenda.

Ide stepped forward and the Doctor felt the legs of the chair give way. Sharp pain lanced through his head as it smacked against the floor. Ide's knee slammed into the Doctor's chest, squeezing the breath from his lungs.

"Very well. Doctor." Ide leaned over his captive, his hawk-like features taut with frustration. "Very well. You have earned yourself a meeting with the General Will. Here on Mercury that counts as 'the hard way'. You won't find it at all amusing."

The Doctor began to doubt if he had done the right thing. Either way, he wasn't going to find Peri locked up in a cell with this bore. Knowing that girl, she would be in trouble up to her ears by now.

His smile wavered uncertainly as the old doubts reasserted themselves.

Peri was in trouble up to her ears.

She crouched in the shadows and waited for the heavy crunch of boots to march past, biting into her knuckles to stifle any whimper or cry that might betray her presence. *"If people with guns show up STAY WITH THE DOCTOR."* How many times had she told herself that? Too many. She wedged herself further back between the storage crates, their steel casing chilling the flesh of her arms. The smell of oil and old sweat mvaded her nostrils. Nice place. She couldn't figure why the Doctor hadn't bolted with her. Why did he think this — she ran her fingertips over the ankh shaped object that that poor man had thrust into her hands — that this was so darned important? Come on Peri, she berated herself, you've done this a thousand times before — what next? She didn't know where she was or how much danger she was in and Ihe Doctor could be anywhere — assuming he was still alive. No — bad thinking. She must believe he was alive and well and in control. Hey, maybe she'd leave this store cupboard and the Doctor would turn up all smiles and explain away all the silly mistakes. No. Too easy. No, she would have to go find him. But first she would need to hide the device. OK, here's the plan Perpugillam, she told herself. Step one, try to retrace her steps to the TARDIS; step two — if she

found the TARDIS, stow the object inside, if not, find a nearby place to hide if, Step three, with the object out of harms way, find the Doctor.

Peri pricked her ears, alert for any sound of her pursuers. Nothing. She waited for a further five minutes, steeled herself and slowly pushed forward the storage room door. Good, no one about. She pushed the door open and stepped out — straight in front of a blaster which was now promptly aimed at her head.

The wide, moist nostrils of the eyeless Hunters twitched revoltingly in her direction. They had been waiting out of sight, shielded by the door. Step one, get cocky; Step two, walk in front of a blaster; Step three, get captured. Brilliant plan Peri, she chided herself bitterly as she was led away.

"If I may summarise," said the Doctor as he allowed himself to be strapped to a medical bed, "what you are saying is that money is power. So the more money you have, the stronger you are."

"Yes Doctor," the First Guardian said, "I suppose you could say that."

"In other words, might is right?"

"Yes."

"Mmmm" The Doctor allowed his head to flop back onto the thin matress. "A very tenuous philosophy. The problem is it's all very fine until someone mightier than you comes along."

The First Guardian smiled thinly. "That is unlikely to happen here Doctor. We have a very ordered society."

"An imposed order, of course."

"Not at all. Are you familiar with the will of all?"

"The political theory, yes. Developed so that individuals can both maintain their freedom and grant sovereign rights to the state. The individual remains free and has all the benefits of living within society. Something along those lines?"

"Adequate, Doctor. Here all the wants and desires of the colonists are collected from cranial transmitters and received by the bio-computer, the General Will. The will of all is then deduced from the general will by perfect logic and reasoning."

"With a few nudges in the right direction by yourselves."

"Quite"

"And the Arena?" En route, the Doctor had noticed broadcasts from a large amphitheatre.

“There are dissenters in all societies Doctor. Those individuals who decide not to follow the General Will are given the opportunity to take part in various entertainments for the masses.”

It crossed the Doctors’ mind that if Peri were caught, she could be taken to the arena. “What form do these ‘entertainments’ take?”

Ide paused in his preparations. “Usually a fight to the death but there are some dramatisations. The survivors at the end of each day’s session are allowed back into society. After going through the trial of the games, they realise it is belter to be part of society than an outlaw.”

The Doctor ground his teeth. This type of governmental bullying he had seen before. “How very Roman. What about the suffering of those poor souls?”

“Outlaws have no rights Doctor.”

That old chestnut. One day he really must record his voice and just play it back whenever he heard this kind of claptrap. “Ah. Take away their rights, they become subhuman — the suffering doesn’t matter.”

“Something like that. Now, please lie still whilst I connect the neural interlace.”

Two pale green tentacles with puckered mouth-like orifices at their ends, slithered from the side of the General Will computer. The suckers probed his flesh with an almost obscene delicacy. The Doctor winced as they latched onto his temples. A sound like a hundred people whispering filled the room.

“Soon Doctor you shall be at one with the General Will. You shall tell us all we need to know.”

“In your case, Ide” gasped the Doctor, “that could take some time… argh.”

Billran’s heart sank as he scanned the list of ‘entertainment’s’ for this afternoons Arena. There it was. His name — Billran vs Pummel. A light to the death for the dubious pleasure of the Guardians. Pummel was a veteran of the Arena, someone who actually chose to stay on rather than accepting freedom. Billran didn’t stand a chance. He sighed. That it should end like this, after all the valiant talk in the underground. They had all said it — how they would refuse to fight if they ever got caught and sentenced to the Arena. So why were his legs shaking, why did he suddenly feel so weak and afraid?

A sudden commotion drew his attention from his oncoming death. A young woman was bundled roughly into the room by two of the security drones. “Let go of me!” Billran bristled at her rough treatment. She obviously knew nothing of the conditions here. He stepped forward quickly before she was punished for her audacity.

“Here, let me help.” He pulled her up and moved her quickly out of harms way.

“Billran,” The dungeon masters’ voice boomed. Billran froze where he was, weeks old scars itching with the memory of disobedience.

“What do we have here then, eh? More Arena fodder? What will it be woman, a fight to the death or a part in one of our plays?”

Billran opened his mouth to warn her and received a stinging backhand slap for his trouble..

“Well?” the master growled at the woman.

“Er, well, I don’t really want to fight. I guess I’ll take the play?”

The dungeon master loosed a raucous laugh. “Right. You’re on this afternoon. Just after Billran here gets slaughtered.”

As soon as the dungeon master left, Billran pulled the woman to one side. “Look I don’t know who you are —”

“Peri.”

“Peri — but you have just made a serious mistake.”

“What — like I should have chosen a fight to the death…”

“At least it would have been quick. Gods, where are you from, have you never heard of the plays?”

“Well, no. I’m not from around here.”

Billran’s breath caught in his throat. *Not from around here*... Life outside the colony?

“Where Peri? Earth? Mars?”

“Well, I’m from Earth. My friend is from…elsewhere;?’

“I knew it!” Billran felt a surge of excitement run through his veins. This was better than he could have hoped. If only he had the Interruptor…

“You were saying?” Peri broke across his thoughts. “About the play?”

“They intend to make you the heroine of an ancient play called Melia and Julian. At the end of the play, the heroine sacrifices herself to the bull God in return for her lover from the underworld.”

“Oh.” her features dropped. “I don’t suppose they use fake blood around here?”

“No. To be precise they cover you with the excretions of a cow in season, tie you down and wait for a bull to try and mate with you.”

“That’s barbaric!”

“That’s history, as is this arena. I used to be a Third Guardian, charged with running one of the electronics companies. I got interested in all those computer files marked ‘Secure’. Amongst other things they contain our histories. Since the Severance, most people in this colony don’t even know we originally came from Earth. Anyway, the ancient Romans built arenas like this one and forced slaves to take part in plays where the hero died a painful and humiliating death. Women were no exception — just more entertaining.”

“My god, it’s Varos all over again.” Peri lifted her hand to her face. As she did so, something fell from her pocket.

The Interruptor! “Where did you get this.” Billran hissed urgently.

“Some poor man gave it me. He was being chased by a hunting party. I think they killed him. I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? He’s a hero. This could save us all. This device disrupts the signals from the General Will Stand back, this could get nasty.” Billran pressed the control stud.

The tentacles slipped lifelessly away from the Doctors’ head. Eyes still closed, he painted the biggest smile he could on his face. “Well, if that’s the General Will then I’m a conservative dresser.” He said, in his most condescending voice.

“How did you resist the machine?” Ide hissed.

“Simple. I told you. I’m a Time Lord. A single Time Lord once created and maintained an entire universe by force of will alone. It’d take more than a viral growth to force my will.” The Doctor’s eyes snapped open and he glared into the eyes of the first Guardian. “Yes, I did say viral growth, Ide. You’re being manipulated by the equivalent of an interstellar mould.” Ide’s confident features flickered for a moment. He paused and gestured for the guards to leave the room. When they were alone, Ide drew a deep breath. “What are you talking about Doctor? What do you know?” Aha, the Doctor thought, the worm turns…

“Ide, alone with the rest of the human race, you have been manipulated, coerced. I’m more than familiar with the biological technology behind the

device you call the General Will. At the centre of it is nothing more than a virus, a very nasty and very dangerous virus."

Ide sat down slowly. "I had suspected for some…" his voice trailed off. "Doctor you must tell me everything. You are the only person to have survived the General Will with your faculties in place. You are a unique opportunity. Perhaps the one we have been waiting for."

"We? My my, the Underground certainly has friends in high places. No wonder they lasted so long."

"Diversions and misinformation supplied to the security forces kept them at liberty." Ide waved the subject aside and released the restraining belts. "But you must tell me what you found in the machine."

"I'm afraid this colony has been infected with a sentient parasite known as 'The All."

The Doctor explained how The All drifted dormant in space until coming into contact with a planet. There the virus would remain until a sentient species arrived and sent a vibration along its mild telepathic awareness. He described how die virus used its small telepathic capability to subtly convince its victims to build cities, aqueducts and constructs of all kinds. How the otherwise natural dwelling race was twisted until the desire for developing technologies and building became an all compelling, burning desire, the one Will of 'The All'. This Will manifested its common aim as progress for the sake of science and profit. Continued consumption of ever more resources by an ever larger population, drove the urge for bigger cities and more constructs of all kinds. "At the centre of it all" finished the Doctor, "is the parasite, its tendrils linked to all major constructs on the planet. A mind that knows only its own desire to grow and reproduce, to consume everything as it becomes the nerve centre of one vast, living city."

"So it uses other life forms to build for it. What then?" Ide's features were a mask of concern.

The Doctor shrugged. "Then it releases an enzyme to poison the cities. A symptom of this is civil disorder and an increasing crime rate. One by one die cities are sucked dry of their energy. They die, crumble to dust. It sucks up the energy and, when it can absorb no more, it bursts. The resulting explosion throws its offspring spores into space."

"Hmm." Ide pursed his lips. "It seems you have understood it completely."

Understood it com… "You mean you knew about this?"

"Not only understood it Doctor, I am a part of it. We live for the All, we die for the All. Guards."

The Doctor was dumbstruck. He hadn't expected this. To be taken in so easily…

The two guards bustled into the room.

"Guards, the Doctor is the leader of the Underground movement. Execute him immediately."

Ide stepped behind the guards as they raised their weapons. "Typical." Said the Doctor with studied calmness, "never an android around to take the bullet these days."

Ide's hand came down in two vicious chops to the back of the guards' necks. He smiled at file Doctor. "The guards are obliged to monitor our conversation.

I am sure of your intentions. We must leave here."

"A double agent?" The Doctor was impressed.

Then hell paid a visit.

Peri and Billran ran down Ihe corridors, barging past rampaging colonists. "I'm sure it's down here somewhere." Peri lead Billran down yet another corridor "Oh"

"What's the matter?" gasped Billran, bending over as he gulped air into his lungs.

"Well, we've found the TARD1S." Peri walked slowly over to a pile of what could best be described as…goo. Green lumps glistened welly in the light. The misshapen mass was woven with what looked like pulsing ochre veins. "It's underneath this. Whatever this is."

"Antibodies." A familiar voice said in her ear.

"Doctor, thank heavens!" Oh god, it was a relief to hear his voice again.

"Indeed." The Doctor broke into a massive cherubic grin.

"Doctor, this is Billran." Peri quickly told him how she and Billran had activated the Interrupter and fled the cells beneath the arena.

"Ah! That would explain things." The Doctor held out his hand to Billran, "I have you to thank for saving Peri's life. Shame about Ide. Poor fellow didn't quite know what had hit him."

Billran shook the Doctor's hand.

"What are you doing?" The Doctor asked, his fixed grin slipping slightly.

"Er, shaking your hand…"

“Yes. Billran, I’m not a palm reader. The device please.”

“Don’t mind him Billran,” said Peri as the Doctor examined the Interrupter, “He thinks being brilliant entitles him to be rude. Doctor,” she turned to the Timelord, “what is going on here, this place is almost as bad as Varos.”

“Mmm?” The Doctor fished in his pockets for a screwdriver. “Yes, almost but not quite. The General Will, as they call it, is a biological computer they use to intercept the desires and wants of the colonists. It then replaces those desires with what it considers to be in the best interests of the colony. Theoretically, it’s not a bad idea.”

“What?” Peri squeaked, “Doctor, it’s just mind control.”

“Yes and no. It doesn’t control their minds per se, just makes them think they want to do something that they otherwise might not.”

“Same thing.”

“Not quite. It ensures everyone pulls in the same direction but doesn’t curtail their intellect or creativity. The best of both worlds if you like. The only problem is the direction.”

“What do you mean?”

The Doctor glanced at his companion. “Peri, you really can be inestimably dim. Or perhaps,” a smile lit up his lace, “Perhaps I am inestimably brilliant. Yes, that’s it.” The Doctor returned to prising the back off of the Interrupter.

Billran nudged Peri. “I see what you mean.”

The Doctor snapped shut the device. “Yes. I think I can do it. Now all I need is a container with no mass whatsoever.”

“What?” Peri hated it when the Doctor rambled on. “Too dangerous here though. Peri hold my jacket.” Before she could say anything Ihe Doctor had dumped his cornea-bruising jacket into her hands. Slowly he pushed his hand into the moist green mass surrounding Ihe TARDIS. A thick squelching noise accompanied a cloying smell like sulphur mixed with decaying meat. Peri gagged. Through watering eyes she watched as the Doctor pushed his entire body into the stinking mass. He re-emerged a few moments later carrying a collection of bits and bobs — without so much as a stain on his clothing.

“Doctor, how? Your clothes?”

The Doctor snatched his jacket back from Peri “I’ll explain later.” he said, as if that were explanation enough. “Now, we must find somewhere private

where I can adjust these ” He held up Billran’s device and a small container containing an opaque fluid. “There’s a storage room nearby.” Peri indicated the direction in which she had first fled with the device. “Excellent. You lead.” said the Doctor as he marched off in front of them.

Peri paced back and forth. Try as she might her mind insisted on returning to the disgusting idea of a planetary virus That concept was bad enough, but then another occurred to her.

“Doctor?”

He grunted, attention focused on his work on the Interrupter.

“Doctor, if this is a living city and the virus is at the centre of it, why can’t the virus figure out where we are?”

The Doctor glanced up. “Ants” he said, simply, and returned to work.

“Ants? What kind of an explanation is that?”

“Imagine if you will, the size this city, the number of people, the number of constructs. The virus knows there are people here but can’t distinguish between them any more than we can distinguish one ant from another. Ants.”

“Oh So what’s in the container?” Peri indicated the fluid the Doctor had shown them earlier.

“Liquid software. A component of the General Will I managed to borrow after Billran’s device had done its work. It’s a protocol node. If someone with enough genius could attach it to the Interrupter it would allow us a direct pathway into the viruses mind. We could put the virus to sleep and deal with it. Fortunately, I am such a genius.”

Peri had stopped listening. “Doctor?”

Her companion gave an exasperated sigh “For heavens sake Peri, if you don’t stop interrupting me I shall never finish these modifications.”

“Doctor?” Peri grabbed at his arm urgently. She could be mistaken but…

“What is it.”

“I think the room’s getting smaller ”

“What?”

“Yes” said Billran. He ran forward to open the door. “It’s locked.”

“Oh no.” The Doctor looked shocked. He ran across the room and pulled at the door “It’s not locked it’s stuck Jammed in place by the room ”

“Well how do we get out?” Peri squealed. One of these days it would be nice to be able to catch her breath. “I thought you said the virus couldn’t

detect us?"

"I don't know. Guessing maybe. That's all we need, a virus with a lucky touch!"

"It's not guessing." Peri and the Doctor turned to face Billran.

"Well how do you explain it ?" asked Peri.

"Quite simple really. I told the All where we were. I have a locator implanted into my spine."

Peri had ceased to be shocked by the nasty practises going on here. "Oh Billran, I'm so sorry. That's how the Hunt found your friends in the Underground?"

"No Peri." Billran's face was hard. "I willingly lead the Hunt to them. I am Guardian Marsh, agent of the undercover counter-terrorist movement. Give me the device Doctor."

The Doctor held the Interrupter just out of Billran's reach. "Why didn't you reveal yourself before now?"

"For the same reason I stayed undercover in the dungeons of the Arena. Subversives often let their guard down after evading a major catastrophe. I simply acted as a wounded party and waited to be contacted. Originally the Interruptor was my plan. We invented it to draw subversive agents out from the manufacturing and scientific communities."

"But something went wrong, eh?" said the Doctor.

"A last minute change of plan by the Underground meant the device was successfully stolen. I had no time to raise the alarm without compromising my identity."

"I see. So that's why the Hunt suddenly descended on the Underground after leaving them alone for so long. And why they brought Peri to you."

"Look could you two shut up." Peri could not believe her ears. "Another few minutes and we'll all be crushed."

"Give me the device Doctor. If not, your pretty friend here will certainly be crushed along with the two of us."

The Doctor was stooping now as the ceiling dropped lower. "No."

Peri's jaw dropped. He couldn't be serious? "Doctor, please don't be stubborn. Give it to him, I don't want to die like this!"

He pressed the control stud on the Interruptor. Rainbow colours flashed across the sky (sky? where had that come from) as fish floated by them, their mouths opening and closing lazily. The walls of the room flapped gently in the wind like cotton.

Peri and the Doctor walked slowly forward, pushing the wall/cloth aside as they went. Now they were standing on a wide, ornate bridge. There was no sign of the room they had just left. A river of glass flowed impossibly beneath, filling the air with a feint crystal tinkling. People walked slowly past them some on stilts, while others rode penny farthings A black man with a rainbow face juggled with planets, his elongated fingers handling the orbs with precise ease. He stared at them nonchalantly.

"Doctor, am I dreaming?" For some reason she couldn't fathom. Peri spoke in a whisper

"No. But the city is."

The city? Yeah, right. "Doctor, cities don't dream."

"How would you know? Listen Peri. The device worked. The virus is asleep and dreaming Since the city is the virus, you might as well say that the city is dreaming." The Doctor smiled. "More poetic than walking through the dreams of a virus, anyway. Think of this as a plane of reality slightly I above our own. Come on."

"But what is it dreaming of? Who are these people? Where's Billran?" Peri ran to keep up with him as he sped off in one of his more energetic gaits.

"Who knows?" he said as she caught up with him. "Could be its home world It's all so long ago now The characters you see here are just the way this plane interprets the vibrations of sentient thought. Billran will be back there, in the room we just left. Here, he's just another vibration. As for the All, they were once a race of artists, craftsmen. They loved to build. Some of the most magnificent structures in the universe were constructed by these people."

"They were humanoid once?"

"Oh yes. But their ecology changed its biology. Their world became poisonous to them They faced the extinction of everything they knew So, being masters of biological constructs they managed to reduce their essence into a viral form and spread through space on a journey that could potentially last for aeons. That way at least some of their kind would survive, their culture would continue They sought worlds with sentient species, gently coerced them into building. The plan was that when the constructs reached a certain mass, the All family group contained in the virus would be able to manifest themselves and repay the races they had used "

“What happened?”

“They were viral for so long they forgot themselves. Their instincts became that of a real virus. Infect, consume resources and multiply. They still try to manifest as humanoid, but they are only able to produce those creatures you call the hunters. Ironic really. One of the most beautiful races in the galaxy perverted into a vile life-form.”

“Can we help them?”

“No Peri. They’ve been viral too long. There is no vestige of what they once were.”

“So what do we do with this one? If what you say is true, you can’t trap it, it’d just consume the resources of the container.”

“Quite right Peri. That’s where this comes in.” The Doctor held up something that looked like a small gladstone bag. “This is a vacuum container, locked within an electromagnetic field. With no resources to consume the virus should return to its dormant state.”

“Yeah, well, you’ll have to find it first.”

The Doctor stopped walking. “I think we just have.” They stood before a huge construct. It reminded Peri of an old Roman temple, all Tuscan columns and gleaming white enormity.

“The centre of the dream.” The Doctor breathed wistfully.

They moved into the interior.

Inside tile central chamber Peri stopped and gaped. In the centre of the room, suspended in a web of pulsing green and red veins was a transparent orb. Peri moved closer. Lying inside was an amoeba-like creature. It reminded her of the sea monkeys she used to keep as a child. Four black orbs sat atop a long spindly body with at least ten pairs of tentacles.

“Not too close Peri.” said the Doctor, fiddling with the bag.

It’s OK. It’s not -” Peri shrieked as the virus suddenly twitched inside its orb. It twisted and regarded her steadily with its four dead, black eyes. She staggered back to stand beside the Doctor.

“sssssSSSo, DDDDDoctor. You are resourceful I see.” The alien voice reverberated in Peri’s mind. She did not like the way it said ‘resourceful’. It almost sounded like two distinct words.

“Ah. Yes, not enough it seems. You should still be asleep.”

“I am. However, we sleep in what you might call a waking dream.”

“How convenient. Look, I don’t suppose I could interest you in jumping into this container?”

The parasite gurgled thickly. “No, Doctor. But you could easily interest me in your knowledge of time travel.”

The Doctor’s face dropped. “Oh?”

“Yes. The lime you spent interfaced with the General Will allowed me a glimpse into your mind. I saw such visions of temporal physics, such constructs one could build from the matter of time.”

The Doctor snorted disdainfully. “If you think I’m going to just hand you the secrets of -”

“NNNNNO need to volunteer Doctor. The General Will is a convenient device to influence humanoids at a distance. You are now in my space. Here I do not ask. I take.”

Peri jumped as the Doctor suddenly screamed and fell to his knees, clutching at his head.

The All gurgled. “Ah-you-are-strong-yet-ahhh”

“N-n-n-No” screamed the Doctor.

“Yes Doctor. Yes, I see it. More, I must have more… “

“P-Peri. The bag -” The Doctor gasped.

She had one chance. The All had focused its attention on the Doctor. Quickly she snapped up the bag and ran toward the vims. For an instant its baleful glare turned upon her and she felt a hot stab in her mind. In one motion she scooped the orb into the vacuum bag and snapped shut the lid. Red lights winked into life confirming the vacuum seal. The pain in her head stopped.

As did the dream.

“So where’s Billran?” asked Peri.

“Oh safely locked away. Doctor, what will you do with the virus?” asked Ide. He had accompanied Peri and the Doctor back to the TARDIS which was now, thankfully, free of goo.

“Oh, stick it in a boot cupboard somewhere. It’s far too dangerous to free from the vacuum.”

“Doctor,” Peri was outraged. “You can’t do that! Just put it in space.”

“And what happens when it encounters another planet? No Peri, believe me, it belongs with us.”

“Well, Doctor, thank you once again for your help.” said Ide. “Within a month we shall re-establish contact with the Earth and begin the deconstruction here.”

“Good man. It will take a long time to recover your resources but you have all you need to rebuild your future. Just be gone before this city crumbles to dust. Well Peri, shall we go?”

“Uh-huh.”

She entered the TARDIS wearing a frown. “Doctor, why won’t you get rid of that thing. There must be some way to get rid of it.”

The Doctor stopped flicking switches on the TARDIS console, his hand paused above the de-materialisation lever. His piercing blue eyes regarded her steadily. “I suppose you could call it responsibility.”

“How do you mean?”

“Who do you think it was suggested to them the way they could evade their fate?”

Oh. Once more the Doctor was being haunted by his past. Peri thrashed around for something to say which would comfort him. “Well, you had the best in mind. If it helps, it’s not your fault things turned out the way they did.”

“No.” The Doctor said, his voice barely a whisper. His eyes stared through Peri, as if he were seeing events of another time and place. “No. It doesn’t help.”

The Doctor brought his hand down on the lever.

LUNAR

THE LOUD LAMENT OF THE DISCONSOLATE CHIMERA
by GREG SMITH

“Please, I’d really rather not hear about your monstrous other right now. I’m eating.”

“But it’s important. I mean, dreams are meant to mean something, aren’t they?” Kadiatu had wolfed her breakfast as usual

Clatter and chatter echoed through the expansive refectory, the shrieks of laughing undergraduates and chair legs on vinyl. Chemical smells mixed in the sticky air with the odour of cooking and consumption. Students filled the hall, dressed in bright colours or stark shades, bolting down their food, snatching conversation or kisses over and around the tables. And yet, with term over and the campus much less crowded, the pace of eating was almost leisurely. Many of the students looked to be on autopilot but that was nothing unusual

Others were bouncing around, if only to annoy their friends still half-asleep.

“I’ve been having these particular dreams. Three different dreams, over the past three nights I’ve never had them before The same people are in them. Sort of. And I actually remember them, remember them without repetition. At least, I don’t think they’re recurring. I’m sure I’ve never had them before.” Kadiatu was tall, with dark skin and darker eyes shaped like almonds Her hair was adorned with extensions and decorations She wore black jeans and a faded sweater.

“It’ll be that new box of Brie I got last week.” Kadiatu’s hand went over a still rather tender area of her stomach as her friend spoke. “I told you there was something wrong with it, but would you listen? That’ll teach you to not raid my ice box in the middle of the night.” Clive, a bottle blonde with brunette roots, hazel eyes and pale skin, dressed in tatty brown slacks and a white short-sleeve shirt. Slim faced with high cheekbones, very thin and several inches shy of six feet, his cultivated emaciation and feigned exclusion were well recognised around the campus. His battered breezer jacket was folded over the back of the chair next to him.

“At least I left the wine.”

“Thank heaven for small mercies.”

“And just think, by taking the cheese I saved your suffrage.”

“You saint, you.” Clive was in the year above Kadiatu, about to graduate in Literature and History. She had another year on her Engineering course.

“But it’s not the cheese. I’m sure there’s something important about these dreams.”

I’m not a psychoanalyst. Look, real problems I’ll listen to, but not your dreams and not over breakfast, thank you. And you shouldn’t worry about them, either “

“Clive, if you ignore your dreams you’re chancing disaster.”

“While I don’t believe that for a second, may I point out that I am, in fact, ignoring your dreams?”

Kadiatu huffed.

“Anyway,” Clive continued. “I got that summer job with Rent-a-Crowd. The pay isn’t great, but it’s not desperately taxing work, and I get to travel.”

“You don’t need to work at all.”

“Yes, well, I have to do something. I’m starting to feel very out of place at pickets. At last I’ll be able say I’ve worked, been exploited and patronised in the service of some money-grabbing git.”

“Oh, poor Clive. The suffrage of the bourgeois Marxist.”

“Yes, thank you,” said Clive rather irritably. He suddenly waved across the refectory, to a man who had just entered.

It was Vic. Tall, Hispanic, shaved head, tight T-shirt and tight arse. The T-shirt was a fashionable rocket-jockey surplus, worn over Blackwatch trews and platform shoes. He jogged over, gave Kadiatu a peck on the cheek, then kissed Clive more fully, sat next to him and started talking.

“Did you hear? They’ve just found number four.”

“Another one?” Clive stopped eating.

“Yeah. In the plaza, right out in the open, first thing this morning.”

“One each evening for the past three nights,” Kadiatu said to herself. “And now one this morning.” She stood thoughtfully.

“Everyone’s saying the body was covered in moon dust. The thinnest layer of dust.”

***

There is an old Ibo proverb. It says. *No man can wrestle with his chi.* However, another Ibo proverb assures. *If a man says yes. his chi says yes.* Life is full of contradictions. That’s another saying. Forgive my pretension but dreams, like stories, are worlds of imagery and fable, imagination and invention. If I am obtuse, I trust you will indulge me. This is the first of Kadiatu’s dreams, the first night.

She stands in a circle of light, only pitch beyond. She feels something behind her, something big and powerful and part of her. She doesn’t know what part, but she can feel something. She tries to turn, to look at it, but cither she isn’t able to move or it is moving with her. shifting the light in the process. The light comes from behind her. behind and above her. It is the same cold colour as the light from the moon was when it shined on her Terran home.

Movement in front of her draws her attention. Something steps from the darkness into the circle of light. It is the figure of a woman, but it isn’t real. An art deco automaton in silver and crimson, ancient but well kept. Her lace is placid, and Kadiatu’s eye is drawn towards her sparkling but indistinct and indifferent jewelled eyes. She walks over scattered rose petals of impossible colours, carrying herself with an assured stride punctuated by casual and playful movements. But there is artifice in her actions and stance. Only her hair could pass for human, a delicate rose tied into the right curve of a soft amber bob.

Another follows her. A white waif in strong armour, a woman of importance, a Lady in chryselephantine mantle. Not just her armour, her robes and her flesh too, her whole body. A classical sculpture drifting elegantly and with expert poise. Thin wisps of golden wire, short glowing curls frame her ivory visage. Cold, white hands end in sharp, gold fingernails. Her feet are bare and trail blood as she walks.

A third figure slides from the shadows, tottering forward into the light. She is skeletal, an awkward figure of dull, corroded metals, bare wire and burnt shielding. She is wrapped in a translucent cloak, a patchwork of thin plastic sheets in primary colours, showing mechanical schematics and logic diagrams. Her footfalls leave no trace. She stands next to the sculpture, a few feet separating them, behind the first figure.

A young man appears in the space bracketed by the latter pair. He is lightly tanned with deep brown eyes; tall with unruly brown hair adding a couple of inches to his height. He wears a black gown, a bachelor's hood striped in magenta, green and cream over his shoulders and down his back. Beneath this, a double-breasted, dark grey suit, a lazuline shirt with a double cuff (fastened with Mackintosh cufflinks), and a yellow silk tie patterned with grey Sphinxes reading Latin.

The automaton comes forward, stepping past Kadiatu, her jaw melting into a warm grin. She stands to the side, signals for the sculpture to step up, invites her to touch Kadiatu.

The Lady wraith brushes her calcareous fingers over Kadiatu's cheek, opening the flesh lightly. "She burns. But the fire is quick, lightning. She would be of limited use." Her voice is singsong, vaguely masculine and arch. She recoils laconically and begins filing her nails. 'I'm not interested. I have enough champions."

"More than one?" asks the man. 'Is that allowed?"

"Eternity is a big place." The skeleton chuckles mechanically, her voice buzzing and piercing. "But," he indicates past Kadiatu. "Your sister…"

"She has the advantage. We diversify to compensate."

'It's all very proper," adds the sculpture.

'I don't understand. I thought…"

The Lady reaches out quickly and breaks the man's right index finger. 'I really wouldn't worry. You're not meant to understand. Anything. You're just here to watch. Facilitate and translate. Be content with that."

"Watch what?" he asks breathlessly.

She snaps another finger, the little one.

Then she sweeps her right arm in half cicle over the spotlit space around them. "This. This Dutch auction. All we require is auctorial observance. Preferably without comment."

Something disturbs Kadiatu.

***

The moon is grey, entirely grey. Its greyness seems to fill everything on it, filtering out other shades. It can seep into anything, drain the light from it.

This is an exaggeration, of course, but humans do live on the moon in buildings of grey, featureless cement, dulled, transparent plastic and grainy metal. For many, their lives reflect their surroundings. It's not that their lives are that different from other lives throughout the solar system. Existence just seems more symbolically defined on the moon.

Moon dust is always being dragged in from the outside, tiny particles of rock dripping minutely from spacesuits and surface craft, staking a claim on the man-made new world on the lunar plains. It's not always noticeable, but it is always there, dancing on the skin, darkening the pores. If you live there for a time, you stop noticing.

There is a story about a rich man, a financier who retired to the moon in the early days of colonisation and development. He became obsessed with the dust, with keeping it away from his rooms and his body. He bought the most advanced air-purification systems, had an independent airlock system built at the entrance to his home from the main complex. He washed himself all over, almost hourly, scrubbing away with enormous vigour and dedication. He shaved everywhere, cut away his pubic and body-hair, trimmed his nails flat. He refused to allow anyone in, and would not leave his sanctuary. But it wasn't enough for him. One day, he scoured all the skin from his body trying to wash the dust away, gouged out his eyeballs because he could feel tiny particles itching and twitching behind and he just had to wipe them clean. So the story goes, anyway. I'd like to know why he didn't just move back to Earth.

However, despite the rumours, the dead body in Yeltsin plaza was not covered in dust. It had been covered in blood, but that had already been mopped away and taken for analysis by the time Kadiatu, Vic and Clive arrived.

"Something is rotten in the state of Lunaversity."

"Shut up, Clive."

"Look, there's Coulmier." Clive pointed across the plaza, to where the vice-chancellor was giving an interview to a modest group of reporters. Kadiatu started squeezing through the crowd around the body, with Clive and Vic in tow. They got to the front, the three of them stared down at the corpse. They didn't recognise her.

It was just like the other ones. A large, grey cylinder in the mouth, the clothes torn aside, the body inhumanely ripped open. Several of the digestive organs had been removed and layed across the rib cage. The face was clean and emotionless, the eyes closed. Kadiatu couldn't know whether the woman had died like that, or one of the police or someone else had closed the eyelids when they found the body.

All the victims were young, taken before their time. They didn't die straight away, they suffered, that much was clear.

Kadiatu dropped under the police barrier, stepped closer to the body and crouched down. The skin looked dry, the girl's face drawn. It was just a girl, younger than Kadiatu, probably a prospective student visiting over the weekend.

"Oi!" One of the campus police, a detective inspector, was rushing towards her. "Get away from there."

Kadiatu stood. "Sorry. I just wanted a closer look."

"Did you know the deceased?"

"No. But I think I can help somehow. I want to."

"This is a private investigation, not a public inquiry."

"Goodness, it's cliché cop," Clive said to no-one in particular. "I feel safer already."

'I think I'll have to take your names. You are?"

"Kadiatu Lethbridge-Stewart."

"And you?"

"Vic."

"Vic what?"

"Rhea," said Vic, grinning.

"And yours?"

"Clive Pennington. And may I ask what your name is, detective?"

"Proulx. Are you all registered at the university?"

"Yes." they said in impressive unison.

"Good. I may well be in touch."

"Oh, we'll look forward to that," said Clive.

Proulx frowned and nodded to a nearby constable. The three students were directed away from the crime scene, back towards the centre of the plaza. The plaza was between the university's primary teaching complex and the main accommodation areas, between the shops and the restaurants, between the offices where many students got part- time day jobs and the clubs where

they spent most of their nights, between the administration centre and the transit station.

The station was the best and quickest way off the moon, for many the only possible way. All the really important places in the system were linked through the STS Central Line and its interchanges. When represented pictorially, it ran through the system like a spine, connecting the worlds, the major areas of population and process. And there were smaller lines, the feeders and branches, the lines circling the inner planets, creeping out from the main stations like neurons.

As the three wandered wordlessly through the mid-morning crowds. Vic drifted away to talk to some of his other friends. Kadiatu and Clive found an empty table outside one of the coffee bars, and ordered some coffee — Kadiatu's black and unsweetened with a dash of whisky, Clive's a cappuccino. The drinks arrived, Kadiatu glanced at the TV set into tire wall above the bar while Clive started flicking through the manual about graduation ceremonies he'd received earlier in the day. There was only sport on the TV, so Kadiatu started looking around, at the plaza and the passers-by.

A woman caught Kadiatu's eye. She was a stranger, but Kadiatu wished she wasn't. Kadiatu wanted to know the woman, know all about her. She seemed unreal, her skin burnished a rich, auriferous bronze coating deep ebony. She seemed to glide, her feet not touching the ground — but it was probably the masking effect of the crowd. Kadiatu wanted to be lire woman, she wanted to be looked at the same way she was looking at her. The woman seemed to shimmer slightly, and Kadiatu blinked. The woman was gone. Kadiatu couldn't see her anywhere; she seemed to have just disappeared.

Clive was staring in the same direction.

"You saw her too?"

"What?"

"The woman?"

"What woman? I was looking at that guy over…"

He pointed but then dropped his hand. "Where'd he go?"

"Attractive?"

"Yes. But that wasn't it. There was something more about him. I wasn't attracted to him, I was…" He paused. "Attracted to the thought of him. Weird."

Kadiatu nodded and narrowed her eyes. ‘Four murders. And I’ve dreamt after the first three. What if…?”

“Don’t even think it, dear,” said Clive. “It’s coincidence. Absolutely, right?”

“I don’t think I believe in coincidence. That woman…”

“They’re calling him the Diner,” Vic re-joined them, putting his arms around their shoulders. “Rather crass if you ask me.”

“How do you know it’s a him?”

“You’re right, you’re right. Maybe it’s that creeping creature people keep saying they’ve seen round corners and running outside on the surface.” Vic grinned. “Lunaversity’s own Nessie.”

“Own what?”

“Mysterious, mythic monster,” Clive explained. “Glimpsed and talked about but never pinned down, its existence never really proved or rationalised.”

***

They created her. With no idea of her true purpose. With no idea what she could do.

Anxiety of influence. False motherhood. The mother’s womb, her life-giving power, has been usurped. You would think she would be lacking something in hybrid vigour, but she doesn’t seem to be. She adapts quickly to almost any situation. Of course, maybe there is something inside that’s missing. Anyway, this is the second dream. Kadiatu stands in a corridor. Grey vinyl floor, sickly yellow walls. There doesn’t appear to be a ceiling — the space just goes up and up. At the end of the corridor is a restaurant, expensive looking and sombre. Only one table is occupied. Three women, and a child in a high chair. They are just tucking into their second course. There are silver platters on the table in front of them. Heads sit on the platters, faces Kadiatu does not recognise. A girl, cold and aged and hard too soon. The others are already being carved away. A covered platter rests in the centre of the blue tablecloth. A woman without a face reaches forward, lifts the cover off. Kadiatu turns as she realises whose head she will see there. She faces the man in the Sphinx silk tie, standing next to her.

“Dreams are projections of something else, something bigger inside,” he tells her. “Dreams are part of you, your soul, your self. Just as you are part of a family, a crowd, a populace, a nation, an entire race. Part of one

universal form, one of infinite forms of expression and conceptualisation of existence."

Kadiatu glances down the corridor. At the end is a ballroom with a bright blue marble floor. Ponderous music plays, mostly brass and with a curious echoing slide to the strings. Three debutantes in voluminous, voluptuous, bejewelled dresses circle a swaddled baby, pattern a romantic and macabre dance. Kadiatu looks away.

"Dreams, myths, those things are an expression of expectation, of suppression, of the things that stalk your mind, your memory. The things you can never control. And if you could control them, if you had learned to control and cow them, you would never forget the fear of them, you would be haunted by the prospect of losing that control. And maybe that would be worse. To be at the regenerated whims of something you've commanded, understood and penetrated, petted and vetted in the past. Something you've held, twisted and treated. That would be devastating. I mean, for one thing, what if it wanted revenge?"

Kadiatu glances down the corridor again. At the end is a drawing room with chintz armchairs and a Mandelbrot patterned carpet. A group of people sits around a card table, fingering small white oblongs on the baize surface. A knitting circle of auntie's teaching their greenhorn nephew to play mah-jong. They turn as one, staring pointedly at Kadiatu, and then at the man. Kadiatu follows their gaze to the observer next to her.

A different aspect Hashes over him; Kadiatu can see the threat in him. He could do things to her. He wants to. He reaches out towards her, one hand that of a torturer the other that of a saviour. He grabs her, one hand on each shoulder. She shrugs from his grip, lashes out mechanically, her arm across his face. There is deceptive control in her movements. His head twists back with a nasty snap. He falls to the floor.

The machine people, her sisters in this land, watch this last with sparked curiosity. Kadiatu exploded awake.

***

The moon is larger than the outermost planet in the system. Buildings pepper a fair chunk of the surface, but most of the student population keep to the areas around the university and Yeltsin plaza and out along the chain pods to the south for some distance. Their haunts and hang-outs tend to form part of the campus by proxy, if not officially.

The Gumdrop, a club off the plaza and down Casper Route, is particularly popular. Perhaps that's because it is one of the few sections of the campus that seems properly air-conditioned and not plagued by extreme temperatures.

As Kadiatu entered the club, a subsonic, syncopated backbeat — music that was truly felt rather than heard — swept over her. The place was quite crowded as usual, another evening in the regular bouts of apocalyptic joy and celebration of the young and directionless. The lights swung around the room, picking out members of the throng. The glowing colours seemed to compete for the eye's attention. The lights danced through Kadiatu's sight, spinning.

The Gumdrop was one of several places the students crowded into on a regular basis to forget. Every set back, bad time, tragedy or farce, they'd go out and dance, dance till cares deserted them. A realist's form of spiritual cleansing, perhaps. Kadiatu had spent the afternoon in her room, sleeping and eating. She had changed into dark leggings, a blue T-shirt and a rough, black leather coat with a gilt effect that ran to halfway down her thighs.

The coat had a large, carefully made inner pocket. It absorbed the shape of the gun. Her father had given her the gun, a pulse pistol. Designed during the war, the weapon had been improved ten-fold since then, and Kadiatu had added her own special modification.

She'd taken something to pick her up before going out and there was now a stony gnawing in her stomach. She saw Clive in the comer, dropping id with Vic beside him, and went over to discuss national and cultural identity with them.

Clive was wearing a purple, crushed velvet shirt and blue PVC trousers. Vic was just in a pair of bright orange shorts and a tartan waistcoat. Kadiatu fired a jealous look at Clive. He smiled and offered her a tab, but she went for the bottle of kirsch instead. There was a cigarette in his fingers. The light streamed through the smoke, highlighting the wispy traces in myriad colours. Dainty Day-Glo cobwebs, floating and changing in the air, or a shoal of amorphous jellyfish dancing some kaleidoscope mating rite, mimicking the dancers in the centre of the club. Vic seemed to be asleep, cuddled up next to Clive, wrapped around his right arm protectively.

Kadiatu talked to Clive for ten minutes. When she'd finished, he looked at her and smiled.

“What, ‘God save Mrs Ethel Shroak’ and so on? You know, Sputnik transmitted on a frequency used by radio hams. Everyone could hear the beeping, bleating discoveries it sent back to Earth, anyone who wanted to. Ideas of nation and conflict fell away. Well, a bit. The pride was still there, of course. Maybe the whole thing was a very clever political statement. Small and clever. That’s the way to explore space, small and clever.”

“What’s Sputnik?”

“My God, darling, you’re an engineer! How can you not know what…?” Clive caught site of Kadiatu’s grin and stopped. They started to laugh together.

“So,” he continued after a while, “did you have another dream?”

Kadiatu had told Clive she was going to have a nap before meeting up with him that evening.

“No, not this time. I don’t think so, anyway.”

“Well there you go. Like I said, coincidence.”

“Suppose.”

***

Will there be a judgement day? A day when Time slips away, a day that suffers Pain no more, a day when Death dies? Dream number three.

“Well, well, well,” says the sculpture, her interest sparked. “She has promise after all.”

“What will happen to her?” asks the dream man, rubbing his neck with his left hand.

“What will be done is done already.” The automaton speaks at last, her voice a cold song.

“Oh don’t be so fucking cryptic.” He looks at the three works of artifice. “What do you think this is, *Macbeth?*

The Lady runs her fingers down the man’s chest, serrating his shirt and tie and the skin beneath. He winces, his eyes flood. “She will serve, as she was made to.”

“You could always leave her alone, leave her to be herself.”

The Lady twists the man’s hand back, tearing his wrist. She wriggles her fingers into the exposed, crimson flesh, scrapes her nails along the reddened bone. He tries to shrink away, but the elliptic women at his side hold him, will not let him fall. His eyelids begin to droop, so the sculpture slaps him to attention.

The robotic skeleton turns her attention to Kadiatu She steps forward, leaving the sculpture to take the full weight of the man.

The robot circles her, runs silicon fingers through Kadiatu's hair and down her spine.

Kadiatu is fascinated by the mechanics, the exposed workings and aged intricacies of the skeleton. She wants to see how it operates, understand it. Use it, drive it.

"She will be mine. For a period. But I cannot hold her." She returns to her place, faces the automaton Her voice is edged with spite "He won't let me."

"I can't help that." Kadiatu can feel the automaton turn away.

"She will pass between us, little sister." The sculpture reaches around in front of the man, brushes the skeleton's cheek "One day, she will find something to give."

"And then?" the skeleton croaks, looking past Kadiatu again.

"She will champion the child." The cold song. "Now that would be ironic " The sculpture smiles "Both the unthinking action of her, and the barren birth."

"It is done, then." The skeleton brushes away her sister's hand. She turns, takes the man's head in her thin, metal fingers and kisses him. Blue flame engulfs him and he disappears with a quizzical look on his face

The related constructs fade away.

As Kadiatu slips into the waking world, she sees the chamber filled with light. It is crowded with books, piles and piles, rough-edged paperbacks, dusty tomes in cracked leather, manuals and ledgers, novels and biographies, plays and pamphlets, countless colours and styles, It has no end.

She turns, hoping to see what is behind her, but her shadows shift and twist with her She is gone

***

The moon isn't exactly over-crowded, especially at this time of year. But popular places such as the Gumdrop get packed quite quickly, no matter what the season Kadiatu, Clive and Vic were still in the comer, slumped around a table, Vic snoring while the other two laughed and occasionally chatted. The floor and the bar were now heaving, full, people crushing into and around each other. The people tended to sweep up and down together,

the few who had a purpose to get across the space finding their progress painfully slow.

Everybody has the ability to distinguish one voice in a general chatter, to focus on that voice, to actually hear it to the exclusion of other voices. Try it yourself. Listen to two people talking, and focus on one voice. Now, swap over and listen to the other person. Stand in a crowded room, a room full of conversation, and focus on just one individual from the assembly. You will hear that person, while the other voices remain hazy background-noise. This is the cocktail party effect.

Then there's recognising a single face in the crowd, identifying an individual regardless of general and specific similarities to those around him or her — though that is more to do with memory and a less esoteric form of brain activity.

It is an extension of these forms of process that allowed Kadiatu to pick out the shadow shifting in the shadows. To spot the figure re-form itself, enter the dancing throng and then leave again to seep back into the darkness. Kadiatu was able to follow the figure's movements in and out of plain sight. It was moving through the club far too easily and quickly, slipping around the people. That's what gave it away. She recognised the way it moved too.

"Come on." Kadiatu jumped to her feet, pulling Clive with her.

"Where are we going?"

"To stop the nightmares."

'I thought they had stopped."

"I mean the real nightmares."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'll explain as we go." She was almost dragging him down the stairs from the booth area, and piling through the dancing crowd.

They got outside, struggling through more and more hazy revellers, and turned along Casper Route. Kadiatu saw the figure shivering away, around a comer. It was a boy, early teens at most, freckled and un-tidy with dirty ginger hair.

"What are we doing?"

"Following something."

"Some thing?"

"Yes. I don't think it's human. I think it's responsible for the murders."

"An alien. An alien murderer. And nobody else has noticed?"

“No It’s very careful ”

“I see. What are you on?”

“Nothing. I’m right about this.”

“Really,” Clive said, unconvinced.

They pressed on, their quarry getting faster They turned up and down corridors, going farther and farther away from the crowded areas of the habitat, until they ended up in a deserted office area. “Silent as a morgue.”

“Could you try another metaphor, please?”

“Tomb?”

“Much better.”

“Where did it go?”

“Down that turn-off.” Kadiatu pointed across the open square. “I think it’s a dead end ”

“And you have the cheek to complain about my observations.”

The entrance to the turning was dark. Kadiatu felt her way into the corridor with stealthy dread. Clive followed with rather more awkward care. Light was cast down its sizeable length from a large window at the far end, reflected light from the Earth. The boy was standing in front of the transparent wall, doubled over.

He shuddered, his freckled skin peeling lightly, like two-day old sunburn. His clothes ripped open, revealing a smooth and featureless body, no hair or nipples or genitalia, no belly button. Then his body began to disappear. A creature flopped from his evaporating frame.

“What happened to him?”

“Nothing There was no him I told you, it’s alien A predatory mimic ”

“You recognise it?”

“I know the type. That’s your Messie.”

“Nessie.” Clive looked the creature over.

“Ambushed by a grotesque ”

“Almost. We’re ambushing it.”

“Well, if you’re sure.”

The creature looked through the window and shook its shoulders. It strained itself, then paused It turned to face back along the corridor, worming its limbs and the trunk of its body around.

“What’s it doing?” asked Clive.

“Animal reactions. It has detected an intrusion, a threat. It will respond to relieve the danger, stop the threat Fight or flight Close the loop ”

“Yes, yes, and if the animal is unable to respond over a period of time it will suffer stress and have to get one of those silly squidgy balls. Does this help us?”

“What it means is, we can’t let it narrow the threat down to us. We can’t let it think we’re a danger to it. I’m not sure if it even knows we’re here, but it knows something is here. Act natural.”

‘What?”

The creature suddenly stared right at them, its gaze sightless but compelling.

“Too late,” Kadiatu sighed.

It danced and ducked at the end of the corridor and started towards the two humans. When it walked, its feet didn’t touch the ground. Her feet. She rode the air like she was treading water, landing every few metres.

Her skin was pale green, vaguely translucent, like the flesh of a ripe melon. She was humanoid, but malformed. Thin and light, her body was lumpy and jerked when she moved. The skin was stretched and rucked over double-jointed claws on the hands and feet. Her head was bald, her lace slender and elongated. White, hollow circles of skin flapped over degenerate eyes. Her nose was a recessed lump, her nostrils flat and flared and asymmetrical, one twice the size of the other.

She opened her mouth, released a sharp crepitation and then a high-pitched heart-rending monotone moan. There was a single fang protruding from the upper palette of her jaw, two cusps of teeth rested further back. The teeth extended slightly, opening like a book.

Glamour grotesque, a Moon-calf.

Her cries rattled the corridor, pushed their way into the walls, passed through the window at the far end. Kadiatu glanced at the clear wall behind the monster, at the blue gloom outside. The rolling, pitted lunar plains, spattered with the scars of impact. The Descartes Highlands, the Cayley Plains, the 1600 feet of Stone Mountain ranged on the horizon. She’d always wanted to grow wings and fly across the moon, rather than sit lamely like a dog barking up at it. She imagined the creature in front of her doing it, its fleshy mass rupturing and splaying into wide wings, legs propelling it into the still air. She could see it soaring and diving, skimming clouds of dust.

It was still coming, drifting with purpose back along the corridor. It put its arms out and began to quicken its pace. It cried again.

“Kadiatu, we have to run, get away!”

“Not yet.” Kadiatu reached inside her jacket, felt comfort in the bulk of her father’s gun. She pulled it out, fingering the trigger, and pointed it at the Moon-calf.

‘Where the hell did you get that?”

“Long story. Don’t look.” Kadiatu squeezed the pulse pistol’s trigger, firing a couple of shots instantly.

The creature stiffened as the shots rang towards it. It oozed a bubble of slime with incredible speed. The bubble caught the two pulse traces and swallowed their power, before sliding back into the creature’s skin.

Kadiatu fired again, dispersing her shots around the creature’s body. Each shot was absorbed in the same manner, residue from the slime glistening across the creature’s skin. It was very close now, but the shots were slowing its pace. It paused six feet from Kadiatu, and the two stared at each other.

Kadiatu felt an impossible itch, the monster screaming inside her mind. Her head felt like a worn, antique sketch of an opened corpse, a neglected anatomical study; gore, graphite and dust. She took her left hand from under the butt of the gun, allowed her grip to loosen, and rubbed her forehead. The creature started to glide forward very slowly. Kadiatu grimaced, and made her mind up. She flipped the switch she had installed on the side of the gun, then threw the device to the floor. She turned, began pushing Clive back and out of the corridor. He didn’t resist her forceful iron prompts. They clattered into the square and Kadiatu grabbed Clive’s hand, yanking him off across the cement floor and then pulling him into the shelter of an entrance to another corridor. She looked back, and then ducked her head down and closed her eyes. The Moon-calf was at the exit from the corridor they had just left, stirring down at the pistol.

A short, red flash marked the explosion; the air around it puckered. The creature was thrown up and its delicate skin split open. It screamed like a strangled baby, its body shredding and crumpling to the floor.

After a few moments, Kadiatu rose and stared over at it. The smoking remains spluttered and popped, green slime ran across charred slivers of flesh. A gash bisected the monster’s face, yellow liquid flowing out over one of the unformed eyes. Kadiatu decided not to take a closer look. She turned around and helped Clive to his feet, dusting him down.

“It’s over. She’s dead.” Kadiatu could hear faint music. Strings of sadness, a barren but affecting symphony. They must be winding down at

the club, she thought.

***

The club was emptying when Kadiatu and Clive got back, almost deserted. People were drifting away, dazed and harassed. The music had stopped, the mood lighting replaced by stark house lights. The only people crowding out the club now were campus police.

Kadiatu and Clive looked around, dumbfounded. Kadiatu grabbed a passing post-graduate by the arm.

"What's happened?"

"Another murder. In front of everyone." He pointed over to the booths in the comer, "Nobody noticed what was going on. He nearly got away too, but someone saw him leaving and a group tackled him. They've taken him away, they've got him." He continued past.

"No." Clive was frozen. He was staring over at the comer, at the booths, at the table he had been sitting at with Kadiatu. She looked over there too. There was a concentration of cops milling around, stringing up a ribbon barrier. Clive broke forward and rushed over.

Proulx watched Clive running to the corner, saw Kadiatu and approached her. "I'm sorry."

She didn't reply.

"Your friend. I'm sorry." The detective paused. "You were close? Yes, of course." He rubbed her arm uncomfortably, then pulled his hand back. "Low self-esteem, that's what does it. Has the person blaming others for their problems. They need to capture something, fill a void in their lives. They find exhilaration in murder, it fills them and consumes them. And then, later, they feel guilt, their self-esteem drops again, they need to re-capture the exhilaration. And they murder again, bigger. It's like drugs are supposed to be. They are not emotionless or unfathomable. They are not that different from you and me. Disconcerting, isn't it?"

The detective was greatly taken aback by the force and volume of Kadiatu's sad moan.

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The real clues to life and meaning are not in dreams, but in memory and detail. Intangible somethings. But there are hints and echoes in our dreams.

Things trying to tell themselves to us.

Kadiatu stands, holding a box of toys, a strigifonn steward on her shoulder. She remembers nothing of this, the final dream. The future, the now when the sisters sit in the palace of the universe, cradling an emerald cherub, their baby brother. The one they have wailed for, the one who defines them, the one they hate. What is death without life, what is pain without remembrance, what is time without growth? Yet each new-born makes a mockery of death, each new pleasure robs pain of its power, and sometimes, unbearably rare as they may be, a single moment of life can dwarf all of history and destiny. These inconsistencies bring tears, and great joy.

And so these dreams are done, may replay themselves but will not surprise us again. If they ever did. There may be others.

Lets pretend for a moment that waking and dreaming never exist side-by-side and simultaneously, that the line that separates the living from dead cannot be blurred. Still life is full of nightmares, monsters, those we meet in dreams, those that come to us when awake. I know' which I prefer.

VENUS

BLUE VENUS by PAUL LEONARD

Smoke, hanging in the air, thick and rancid.

Metal The glint of a knife The evil cherry glow from the tongs as ZulfIq removed them from the fire. The smell of burning fat.

Arms, holding her down, like bands of hot copper. A thick hand in her mouth, lasting of salt and rubber.

Zulfiq smiling, his teeth white, his eyes glinting red, as if the forces of fire and darkness had possessed him.

How could he do this to her?

How could…?

She screamed, and screamed, and screamed, but the hand stayed in her mouth, and her throat hurt, and it did no good.

Mark Tajore hung in the Venus Station core, marveling at the works of man. An entire planet made into a new home. A world where men and women could live as they had always done, as they were meant to do. A dream come true,

The oceans shimmered, wisps of cloud trailing across them like half-coiled snakes. Islands like green beetles, fresh forests gleaming. How many years had he worked for this? How many centuries? A flicker in his eye from his DataMop told him the answer 357 years, 3 57 centuries

Historical time, he thought. You're practically an artefact. He could feel the sun-wind on the metal carapace that he wore against the irradiated darkness of space Somewhere inside it, there was skin, there was flesh, but

its pains were nullified, washed by tides of controlling hormones and watchful microsurgeons. So long Tajore had kept himself alive for this, to see this, to breathe this moment. It's almost time to die.

But Tajore didn't want to die just yet. He wanted first to walk those shores, smell the green- burdened air of the new Venus that he and the boys of the Core team had built. Even though his lungs were carbon filters, his heart an applesized machine, he would still be able to smell it. Taste the fruit. Wouldn't he?

A voice in his ear, gentle, distantly female. "Mr Tajore, the down shuttle is leaving in five minutes. If you wish to proceed, make your way to the dock now."

He nodded at the abstract voice, the machine generated woman who was telling him what he already knew. He touched a keypad that was part of his wrist, twitched a specified muscle in his arm. The Venusscape swung away, became a curved horizon, the sunlight fading in thin, delicate bands of violet. It was replaced by the unfolded tcsseract of the Station, his home for most of the long centuries of his life. Cubes and spheres and rhomboids flashed white fire, cables and links shouted in primary colours. The shuttle was there, centre vision, enhanced, picked out in crystal detail, like the target in a computer game.

For a moment he was a child again, his hands real and sweaty on the joysticks, the VR helmet heavy on his head, Violet's childish giggles and shouts of excitement muffled by the earset. It had seemed more real than the world around him, and he remembered once how he'd fantasised about being swallowed up into a computer game, about living the excitement. Now, he could ahnost believe that had happened. It had been so long since he'd touched anyone.

The station rushed past him, a blur of corporate images in chunk-of-steel shapes, each suggesting power, control and modernity.

She had screamed.

"Mr Tajore, you're off target."

Tajore blinked, saw the red firework-flash on his left retina, the shuttle drifting away to the right. He corrected swiftly, hoped none of the boys had noticed. He didn't want them to think he was failing. He didn't want their sympathy. Not now.

When she had been a child she had looked at the bright bright star, that wasn't quite a star. "It has tiny spikes, " she'd told her friends. They'd laughed, they didn't have her sharp eyes, and they couldn't see the spikes.

Her brother had told her that the star was a goddess, a silver woman in the sky, smaller and more slender than the Moon. "Like the women who come in the helicopter?" she'd asked, innocent then. She had been eight? Nine? "From Dar-Es-Salaam?" The big city might as well have been in the sky, for all she knew of it. From it came food, and medicines, and the games that her brother was always playing behind the black helmet.

"Maybe," her brother had said, and had touched her shoulder, an odd, soft gesture. "Maybe they will save you, with the help of the silver goddess. "

But they had not saved her. No one had saved her.

They had been down before, of course, in suits, or remotely, through droids. But this would be flesh. Human flesh, touching the new soil of Venus. Everyone would be watching the miracle, even the corporate *mensch-dom* of Earth, its neuter execs and beetle-like workers. And Tajore intended to make an impact: he intended to show them what men could do, using the ancient rites of engineering, of computer science, of mathematics, the shamanistic power of technology.

As they drifted down towards the thin white strip of concrete in the green jungle, the shuttle wittered away through Tajore's DataMop, giving him C02 readings, temperatures, viral and bacterial levels, gravity variations, even the likelihood of a ground tremor in the next hour.

The boys were ecstatic, jumpy. Their faces flashed smiles, their hands rippled over controls, doing nothing in particular, just playing with the circuits. They made jokes, punched space. The air in the cramped shuttle cabin smelled of clean sweat with a testosterone edge of excitement. The sky changed colour around them, blooming flower- blue as the shuttle descended from the red fire of re-entry.

Tajore just waited, waited as the land rose green below them, hunched as a dragon's back from the shimmering sea. He waited as the clumsy machine banked, braked, bumped down and rolled to a stop on a thin white strip of concrete.

The boys cheered. This was their dream as much as his: born on Venus Station, with the world unfolding below them, they were his gang, his

power, his youth and eyes and continuation.

Outside, ferns as big as dinosaurs stood like the pillars of new cathedral, festooned with moss. Giant blue flowers draped themselves over the spikes of giant bromeliads, decorating the fringes of the runway like half-crumpled parachutes. Flying things hung in the air, but these weren't animals — they were machines, cameras for the news networks. There were no human reporters: Tajore would not allow it. He had to be the first. It was his dream. Everybody allowed that.

At last, the shuttle canopy slid back, and Mark Tajore breathed the air of Venus. It smelled… Strange. Slightly sulphurous. Not at all the boundless green he had expected, that he remembered from the Tanzanian forest-fringes of his childhood.

The place where humanity was born and first stood up. The place where we evolved our culture, our ancestry. The place Tajore had been hoping to recreate.

Disappointed, he walked down the narrow ramp. He hardly noticed when he put his metal- shielded foot onto the warm concrete. Behind him, the boys cheered again. The news cameras buzzed and clattered as thick as flies on shit.

He tried to remember the line he had prepared, the memorable words of the first man on Venus. He couldn't.

"Hello! Shuttle party!"

Tajore jumped. The voice had come from somewhere ahead, a voice of the fern forest, of the crumpled blue flowers. Tajore squinted against the glare from the white runway. Behind him he heard the rattle of weapons.

A soft footstep on soil. "Mark Tajore, isn't it?" A face, bulging blue eyes, a hat, a long rust- coloured coat. He was standing under one of the flowers, an insouciant smile on his face. His eyes lit on Tajore's artifice-laden body, then fixed him with a guilt-inducing gaze, as hard as a spear.

She screamed. She screamed and I lay there, gazing at the stars. A bottle of beer in my hand — Tiger? Elephant? I remember that bitter taste. All the tigers and elephants are gone now. The entire world is gone. This is the New World. This is my redemption. What is this man doing here?

The boys were jittering, chattering like monkeys, long guns in their hands. They were looking to Tajore for the voice of authority.

Wearily, Tajore spoke. “Yes, this is Mark Tajore of Venus Development Corporation. You are trespassing on this planet.”

The blue eyes continued to stare. The man said nothing. Tajore felt anger rising inside him, like a young fire. Just for a moment, it was good. “Under the Venus Treaty you are not allowed use of the patented territory until such time as a royalty agreement-”

“What is he talking about?”

A woman’s voice. A *woman* had reached Venus before him. After everything that had been done.

Pain.

Only pain, racking her stomach, her chest, the violated place between her thighs.

The old woman, stinking and smiling, catcradling the dirty thread in her hands. “It will stop soon, “ she kept saying, between smiles. “It will stop. “

But the pain only got worse. And the fever burned its way from her belly, to her arms, to her legs, to her brain.

Eventually, although the old woman kept smiling, kept winding the thread. Violet worked it out. She was going to die.

“I’m the Doctor and this is my friend Sarah.” Tajore still didn’t understand. The woman — Sarah, then? — was dressed in some kind of 20th century traditional costume — red, black trousers, tall boots. She said she was a reporter, but didn’t even know the names of the major networks.

The other one -

“Now, how about a cup of tea? Darjeeling? Earl Grey?”

“You’re not human, are you?”

“I’m the Doctor, and this is my friend -”

“Yes, yes, you’ve said that.” Mark felt something he hadn’t felt in a hundred years — ridiculous. The news cams were still here, fluttering and clattering, recording the whole stupid incident. He’d told his DataMop to flag an embargo, but it might not do any good. The live coverage was ruined. People would think that something was wrong with the new dream world.

The Doctor appeared to have forgotten about tea. He was throwing something up, down, something attached to his hand by a string. “So you wanted a world just for men?”

“Not just men. Men, and women who are prepared to remain women. Women as women should be.” A pause. “It was the deal we made with the Earth governments.”

“Humph,” said the Doctor. It was a disapproving noise, one that Tajore had heard so many times in the early days. He had hoped never to hear it again, least of all in a clearing under the moss-draped ferns of his New World, by the side of a blue transmat box that belonged to an alien who had no right to be here.

“Where are you from?” snapped Tajore, glancing at the box, wondering if it had weapons. “Centauri? Tractis?”

The Doctor just shrugged. “It doesn’t matter. What matters is that I’ve got your sister. And I want to give her back to you.”

The silver woman walked through the wall of the tent. She did look like the women from the helicopters, but her clothes were covered in a silver fire, so she was also a goddess.

Her face was wreathed in anger. “How can people do this?” she said. She leaned close to Violet.

Distantly, there were shouts. Then a quiet voice, a man. “You will tell them she is gone. You will tell them that you buried her…”

“Quickly!“

The goddess lifted Violet, and she screamed with pain. Her vision filled with silver and black.

She would ask the question. Even if she was going to die. Struggling to swallow her clotted saliva, she whispered, “Where…?”

“To a better world, I hope. “

Did even goddesses have hopes? Did they have dreams?

Tajore had told the boys to go. They’d left, confused, whistling, their moment of glory ruined. He’d insisted Sarah-Jane Smith went too, so she had gone with them, asking questions, mostly about men, and women, and the Treaty of Rightful Culture. Maybe that would keep them busy: explaining to some antique woman why they needed a world where men and women could live as they should live, together but apart, separate co-operating species within an framework of rules dictated by a million years of biology. Not this bland genetically engineered *mensch*-dom of modem Earth, where no one had gender and everyone was a power-crazed mannequin. But enough.

The door of the transmat box was opening. And Violet was there.

She looked thin, frail, a damaged little girl in a faded dress. Mark stared, wondering. Would she know him?

She nodded at Mark, gave a tiny smile, then walked up to the Doctor and slapped him across the face.

'How *dare* you? How *dare* you do this to me?"

The man who called himself "the Doctor" just stared, his bug-eyes bulging madly. "But I saved your life!"

"You didn't save me from being hurt!" The pain was still there, and the strangeness. The Doctor's wonder-surgery had saved her life, but couldn't undo the circumcision. Now she felt the anger, all the anger that had been hidden by the fear and pain.

"Well, I…"

"And this?" She gestured at the weird forest, the staring unnatural sky, finally at the robot- man with her brother's painted face. "I don't want to see all this!"

The robot-man spoke, clumsily. "Violet. It's a new world. Venus."

Violet looked at the sky. This was Venus? She looked at the machine that had been a brother to her, once. "It's not silver any more," she said. Then she turned to the Doctor again, met the staring eyes. "Take me back."

He shook his head. "I can't do that."

"Oh, yes you bloody well can." It was the voice of Sarah, the "goddess" who had rescued her. She was standing by one of the thick fem trunks, her face a mask of anger. "Doctor, what did you think you were doing? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't need to know."

She just stared at him, hands on hips. Violet had the sense that something big was happening, something total: the end of a friendship. But she didn't care about it. She didn't care about anything at all now. "Just take me back," she repeated. "I want to go home."

"They'll kill you," said the Doctor.

"No they won't." She hesitated, seeing an advantage. She had no real desire to see her family again. They had betrayed her, mutilated her. She had nothing to say to them, not now. "OK, take me to Dar-Es-Salaam." *Where the helicopters came from.* "And give me some money." She smiled. "Lots of money. And someone safe to stay with."

“No,” said the Doctor.

“Yes,” said Sarah.

A pause. Violet noticed strange, arrow-headed clouds in the wrong-coloured sky.

She looked at the thing with her brother’s face. “Yes,” it said.

The Doctor just shook his head. He glanced at Violet, then walked over to the painted face and started to talk to it, slowly, seriously.

Sarah moved to the door of the blue box, opened it, winked at Violet. She moved quickly then, her feet crunching on the knobbly moss. The Doctor looked up — too late! She was in the space-inside-the-space, the room with machines that glowed in colours and whiteness.

Sarah just stood next to the doorway, with folded arms. When the Doctor came, she said, “What are you going to do now? Throw her out by force?”

“You don’t understand,” said the Doctor briskly.

The two of them stared at each other over the slow movements of the time rotor. “You haven’t resolved anything!” snapped Sarah-Jane. “Doctor, you kidnapped that girl from her own time.”

“You did it. And also saved her life,” said the Doctor.

“—for some political nonsense, one of your half-baked schemes for interfering in —”

“I just wanted Tajore to feel better. And to save Violet’s life. I heard the story —”

“— Earth’s history. Why can’t you just leave it?”

“I wasn’t interfering!”

Her expression said that she didn’t believe him. Violet decided it was time for her to speak.

“I just want to go home,” she said quietly. To her shame, she was crying.

The Doctor looked at her. He looked at her for a long, long time, and she saw the kindness there. “All right,” he said at last. “But you must never -”

The anger came back. “Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do.”

During the short weeks that passed while he prepared himself for death, Tajore couldn’t let the questions rest. Had it been real? Or had it been an elaborate fake, a well-researched joke by the *mensch-dom* that ran the Earth?

That ghostly anger, that lost look in her eyes. The shadow-play of fear and anger. Did it matter, in the end? Tajore knew what he had done. He also

knew that the Doctor was right: the thinly-preserved culture of male dominance in which he lived could not populate Venus, or any other world. Ideas spread through space more easily than the spores of life. It had been a dream, a two-hundred year dream held together by the long, hard fight to make the acidic hell of Venus into a sort of paradise. Few of the men on the project were under a hundred, for all that he called them boys. They were lost boys, boys who would never grow up. And there were almost no women. He had known these things, but he had imagined somewhere on Earth the world of his childhood, the world a helicopter ride away from Dar-Es-Salaam, where men drank beer in the shade of the concrete houses, and women —

She had screamed.

But at least she hadn't died. He knew that, and when the time came for the mechanical heart to be switched off, Tajore could die in something a little nearer to peace.

In the last days, it did occur to him to wonder what had happened to her.

The sheer walls of the cruise ship were like the walls of a building: gaudy and huge, beyond the dreams of avarice of the girl who dived for pearls.

They called her that: *the-girl-who-dives,* because usually only boys dived, and men. The guides told the tourists about her, smiling in that pseudo-patois of the East African coast, the language that confirmed the sense of superiority latent in the old Western men and women who spread from the cruise liner like rich sea-birds, strutting, wondering, wide-eyed and shitting money.

"She the *girl-who-dives,* yes."

And she would not smile, and returned the tips they often gave her. She only dived, and gave the pearls to her *boss-man.* She dived deeper and deeper, crazily deep, and the guides knew, and the *boss-man* knew, and the *girl-who-dives* must know, that one day her lungs would collapse, or her heart would stop, or the bubbles would burst the tubular walls of her arteries, and she would not return to the surface. Some of them knew her scars, suspected some of the reason, but none of them could know all of it. She dived for the pearls. Not to own them — she never stole from the *boss-man*, nor tried to. No, she just wanted to see them, the silver worlds in the deep-sea darkness. She wanted to hold them as they spilled from the violated oysters, and take them to the light for the first and only time. And

sometimes she thought of the merchants, who would take the pearls and make them lustreful but dead, and string them round the scrawny necks of the ancient tourists. And sometimes she thought of her brother, who would take the goddess-world in the sky and make her an artefact, manufactured to the specifications of men and filled with green, meaningless forests and arrowhead clouds, a living dead land, coloured brown, and green, and blue.

MONDAS

REASEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT by RICHARD JONES

“Waiting rooms are so Einsteinian, don’t you think? A conceptual space dependent on a conceptual passage of time.” The waiting room was that of the system’s premier advertising agency, and the speaker hadn’t been there a second ago. “My apologies. You’ve no idea who Einstein is.”

“I’ve no idea who you are,” snapped Dealy Plaza, “or how you got up here.”

The last part was inaccurate since Dealy had just watched the visitor smoothly materialise. Now he watched as the visitor got to his feet, revealed a handkerchief and gave a quick polish to the wall’s “The Word Shapers — A Division of Mondas Marketing” plaque. Its sexless body was clothed in a skintight and entirely white suit For a head it wore a fashionably blank globe.

“The reputation of Mondas has spread. I am your four o’ clock appointment”, the visitor said

Dealy Plaza was confused

“I don’t have a four o’clock appointment. I’m working on a portfolio. I don’t have time…”

“Mister Plaza, I’m from a place called Gallifrey. You may have heard of it We make time ”

Extract From “New Worlds, New Flesh, New Devils — The Mondas Conspiracy Exposed” by GØK.

“Eloquence, n. The art of persuading fools that white is the colour that if appears to be. It includes the gift of making any colour appear white.

Ambrose Bierce, The Devil's Dictionary.

"He who sets out to destroy monsters should take care that in the process he does not get eaten! Big slashy claws and tentacles also want keeping an eye on!"

Nietzsche on an off day.

But what if you *had to* make the omlette without breaking the egg? What if the shell weighed 5.98xl0^{21} metric tons and so the only way to move the contents to the hob was to leave it where it was, intact, and just transport the white and yolk? You'd have to be either a magician or one hell of a five star chef, right? Well the Mondasians did it. Only they were moving a planet.

Big things planets. Far too big and heavy to go free-wheeling around the galaxy. Unless you find a way to split the physical object from the inconvenient physical laws that applied to it, and then tow the planet away leaving behind its gravitational presence as a 510,100,00 square kilometre bubble. A hollow, invisible sphere of imaginary mass left orbiting a sun while your real world went off on its peregrinations.

Humanity discovered the shell as early as the Dragon war, when squadrons of their fighters kept crashing into it, but it took them until the end of the fortieth century before they plucked up the courage to colonise the thing. By the time the Solar System was so overcrowded that people were weaving tents out of superstring taffeta and setting up shantytowns on the sun, then people really had to get over their fear of living on a hypothetical concept. The invisible shell got a layer of turf laid and an atmosphere squirted on and became a good address. They called it 'Planet N' to try and pretend it was just like any other world. Colloquially it was known as 'Mirrorball'.

By the year four thousand and nine it almost could have passed for a typical human colony. Hate crimes, hailstones, low level ozone and ribbon gymnastics. There were talk shows too.

"Hello. I'm Madeline Home." Cheers from the audience. "Now we've got a very special show for you today." Special, thought Madeline, in that it would both plug a book and involve a salacious punch-up. Normally her broadcasts just alternated between the two intents. "And a very special guest. Let me introduce you to this woman." The camera cut to the raised

area at the front of the studio. The guest sat wearing a body suit that could perhaps call itself a combat suit if it wanted to go looking for trouble. Even though it was pink and came with a pair of white high heels. The guest hadn't worn it once since her adventuring days, but Costume had persuaded her it was more appropriate than the Laura Ashley Spring 4009 collection that now filled her staid wardrobe. Madeline stepped up next to her and into shot. She continued. "To remind her of the millennium where she grew up, this woman chose to live in one of the most low-tech areas of Mirrorball. Despite overcompensating a little, she and her husband have been very happy there the last five years.

"On the street where Stacey Ssardschattel lives is a butcher's shop, a postbox, a road thick with bicycling policemen, a cute but grotty pub, a newsagents and a colossal flesh factory purpose-built for the transubstantiation of frail human bodies into cybemetically amended mecha-meat *ubermensch.* This factory was a sudden and overnight addition to her neighbourhood, and Stacey's not happy about it. Are you Stacey?"

Clearing her throat, Stacey said, "No Madeline, I'm not. I'm no bigot, but I'm not having Cybermen in my backyard. None of us should, not with this planet's history."

There were shrieks of approval from the crowd. Some sounded like anti-Cyberman slogans and some sounded like, "You go girl!"

"All right! All right! Calm down!" Madeline's gentle but intense grin guided her audience back to quiet. "Because we also have with us today the Managing Director of Transhuman Express, the company in question. Mister GØK, welcome to the show."

"Hello Madeline," said the other creature on the podium. 'Mister GØK' looked like a wire-form model of a human body, except that the wires were thick, venous tubes of flesh held together by metallic concertinas. They expanded and contracted with a rhythm slower than its speech. "I think there's been a misunderstanding. Neither myself, my employees at Transhuman Express nor any of my clients are Cybermen. Sure we're all modified humans with regulated emotions and artificial biosystems, but the ancient Mondasians didn't actually patent the idea." A member of the audience got to his feet.

"You a [BEEP] Cyberman, man! Look at the [BEEP] state of you! You some [BEEP] machine freak. You not [BEEP] natural!"

“All right! All right!” said Madeline. The grin was as wide as ever. Five minutes in and the show was going in exactly the right direction.

“Indeed, I’m anything but natural, but unless you’re cute enough to belong to a Gaia cult on a terraformed world then I don’t see how that gives you a reason to want to crucify me.” It was projecting its words in a baritone.

“You’re a monster.” said Stacey. “So what if the Cybennen didn’t patent anything. It’s not about corporate identity, it’s about humanity. You might as well be a Cyberman, and I’m going to stop you!”

“Perhaps Ms Ssardschattel,” Madeline toggled her body language to ‘sensitive’ and leaned in close to her guest, “you’d like to tell us about your personal reasons for hating Cybermen so much.”

So Stacey told them why. She told them about how they’d killed all her friends and how they ended her glamourous career as a freight loader. About how they set her on a path that lead to her becoming infertile, dislocated centuries in time and married to a giant lizard. About how, and this one was particularly annoying, her original fiancée had turned out to *be* a Cyberman. His name had been Bill.

A member of the audience got to her feet.

“I don’ get why you keep trying to marry aliens. Is it to do with visas?”

She was ignored.

“The agency have done a very good job on all of you.” GØK told the audience. “Especially on Ms Ssardschattel, which I should expect since she travelled with the ultimate dupe.”

“What are you talking about? What agency?”

Madeline, to camera four: “And this is where tonight’s show gets really interesting. You see we’re not just dealing with a dispute between neighbours. Mister GØK has just written a book that claims to expose a cosmic conspiracy that undermines our perceptions of our bodies and souls. There’s an extract for you to read now by swallowing the pill your viewer is about to dispense, or if you’re on a low-psychotomimetic diet you can absorb the same data by contemplating the mandala on the bottom left comer of your screen.”

Report from Dealy Plaza to Mondas Marketing’s board of shareholders. *(Dated to the equivalent of BC two million.)*

Our best intelligence suggests that the client was one **Agent Payle,** a liaison officer between the **Matrix Agents** and the guys at **Celestial Intervention.**

From what we can glean his position in the Watchmaker Bureaucracy is given scant regard, which is perhaps unwise as it gives him access to both the way everything is and the ways in which it could be changed. This supposition that he was not one of the Gentry *per se* was borne out by his blithe intercessions into history, and by his retrained dress sense.

Payle began with flattering small talk.

"It is clear to us that the Mondasians are the people to talk to regarding PR and presentation." He opined. "After all, when you walked on the surface of Earth you were thought of as Gods, while the **Daemons** made a rather less favorable impression."

I casually put the **Daemons** failure down to atrocious pre-publicity but accepted the compliment, adding that we were now handling affairs for a number of advanced races that wished to suggest their divinity to Neolithics. **Agent Payle** nodded and let slip that in times to come we would win enterprise awards for what he called our 'Von Daniken Accounts'.

It was about the manipulation of a culture that he had come to us. **Payle** displayed an image inside his cranial globe. I would have enclosed a copy with this document if I thought you could cope with it. Try and make me describe the thing and I'll have you in front of an industrial tribunal before the end of the afternoon.

"What the hell is *that*?" Before I could get this out I had to down most of the spirits we were saving for the Salesfair office party.

"The image is from about three million years in your future. It's of what we want you to prevent. It's a **human being**."

Planet N, 4009.

Everyone in Madeline Home's studio had swallowed the tablet containing the above, but very few had actually swallowed the story.

"What's that all about?" asked another audience member. "Mondasians knew what humans looked like."

"Not humans like the one in that picture. Not humans like me or the ones I've got in development back at the plant. Not humans like the ones we all should be by now." Appendages resembling office staplers flapped smugly around GØK's shoulders.|

"I think it's very important that we should all practice safe sex." offered a random participant. This piece of good advice had nothing to do with the matter at hand but someone got up and said it every week.

GØK resumed his diatribe. “Do you really think this is credible? Humanity sitting around making banal talk shows in the forty-first century? We shouldn’t, even still need to talk. Something happened that stunted our race. It happened on Mondas, and I know what it was.”

Madeline made a mental note to have that edited before broadcast. The creature was welcome to shat ter all understanding of history, but it wasn’t going to diss her format.]

“Why should we believe any of this?” demanded Stacey. “That ‘report’ we just ingested, you made it up! You can’t have got hold of a report from a planet that died that long ago.”

So GØK told his story.i

He had been on the original team sent to assess whether the gravity shell was suitable for turning into ; a planet. There had been a real fear that the object might not be as stable as it seemed and could wink out of existence just as soon as everyone had settled in and got comfortable. GØK, who had been an unmodified human in those days except for an earring and a tattoo of a seahorse, found the ‘planet’ to be safe. He also found, as he tapped his equipment into the shell’s magnetic pole, that on a world build entirely out of weird physics, at least some of it was going to relate to time travel. There was a nictication or an echo, GØK was not sure which, that let his machines on the gravity shell communicate with the computer systems of the planet that had been there before — Mondas.

The link was random and unreliable, but by perseverance GØK was able to dredge out of antiquity fragments of data from the culture that became the Cybermen. What he learnt lead to him discarding the bulk of his body and mind to replace them with something better.

Madeline, in close-up: “And you might make just Ihe same choice when you hear what GØK learnt. Coming up after this short break” from the narrative.

The Intelligence Agent called Lao-tse teaches the I Ching codes to domesticated primates, injects some fortune-telling hocus-pocus and thus sends down the 2,500-year CNS-RNA-DNA teletype channel this basic code. SHe knows that the Confucians will distort the signal with Boy Scout moralisms [and] that countless charlatans will peddle vulgar I Ching fortunes for a nickel in Oriental bazaars. But SHe knows, also, that when external technology catches up, 20th Century Intelligence Agents will

receive the dot-dash trigram message and realize that binary codes and triplicate trigrams are genetic guide posts explaining the direction and molecular structure of evolution, from the terrestrial, earth, to the extraterrestrial, heaven.

Timothy Leary, Foreword to R.A. Wilson's *Cosmic Trigger.*

From Dealy Plaza's personal journal.

Called to the controller's office. God, I hate him. A man of no vision who only got to the top on the back of his one marketing innovation — the discovery that that was legal to sell tactical nuclear devices over the counter if you put a sign next to them saying "For Ornamental Purposes Only!" Bloated, pompous slap- head that he is, he decided to give me a motivational talk.

"We're dealing with the Gentry, boy! The people that control the medium of our lives. Imagine you're a fish and you've just been introduced to some bastard who says he's got complete control over *water*. You'd spawn your keks. Well it's the same thing here, only these 'Water Lords' asked that fish there," He pointed viciously at me, "to do some work for them, and so far he's not come up with so much as a…" The controller reached in vain for an aquatic way of saying 'provisional concept outline document' so as to be able to continue the metaphor.

"Women are proving the awkward demographic." I offered him this as an explanation for the pace of my work. "Human men are going to be naturally resistant to altering their forms and uploading their minds. It would seem too much like a castration. But no woman is going to buy the heterosexual male delusion that the body has non-permeable boundaries, and according to our best market projections, women will having at least a limited role in running their society by the time they get the cyber-technologies on line."

On hearing this he thought I was advocating sending Mondasian flying saucers down to Earth to abduct all their womenfolk. I don't know where he gets these ideas. If I could get useful ones from the same place then he'd be as high an achiever as his fleet of company hopping-pods suggest. The trick was, I explained, not to abduct sixty percent of their population (!) but to make technological transhumanism equally horrifying to all genders.

To do that we had to give it a threatening, rapacious face. A bad example of what altering your nature could do to you. It is a tried and tested advertising strategy. To warn people off a drug, you don't discuss the

physiological effects of it with them, you show them a picture of an addict looking like shit. We needed to provide that picture. The ugly face of the Cybernetic Man. Inimical to humanity and coming to getcha.

"This is what you've been working on? Robot space people? It's crap." Like I said, a man of no vision. "It won't work. If you make enhanced humanity scary then humanity will just want to make itself scarier to fight back. You'll accelerate the process."

Carefully I spelled out that what I was proposing would be a balancing act. On one hand the monsters we would build would make the statement, "You don't want to be like us, we're nasty" and on the other hand they'd make the statement, "You don't want to be like us, we're rubbish". We could give them so many unfeasible weaknesses that they'd be sending out the message that humans would have to be stupid to trade their souls to become *that.* Certainly they'd threaten humanity, but they'd never win. That would distract from their real purpose of shambling around inside miniscopes.

Eventually, the controller began to warm to the concept, and becoming eager to see my designs. Last night I'd set my computer generating dozens of variant forms for our monsters, so I had no shortage to show him.

"The project's going to need strong branding." He said, and sent off my designs to the Telos branch office to see if the boys could come up with a logo. All I had left to tell him was that to exploit people's natural stubbornness I decided to give my Cybermen the slogan, "You will become like us." To this humans would be compelled to reply, "Oh no we bloody won't." And once we'd got them saying that, we'd have cracked it. We'd have sold them stagnation and the whims of evolution.

Planet N, 4009

The above was retrieved in front of a live studio audience. GØK's spontaneous demonstration of his method was overseen by a number of celebrity scientists and relationship experts. All of which were such regulars on Madeline's show that when they attested the report was genuine, none could disbelieve them.

The tide was turning. The anger in the audience was no longer directed at "filthy [BEEP] traitor to humanity" GØK, as it had been before the break. Now a steady fury was rising at the Mondasian's mysterious clients for cheating them out of progress.

Stacey was becoming confused. Floating in front of her was a holographic caption that read "STACEY: Doesn't want robot monsters in her town." GØK had one that said "GØK: Says we should all be cyborgs." Stacey was beginning to wish that everybody always had little phrases attached to them that really did sum up their whole agenda in life. Not only would it end all duplicity, but if ever you got bewildered you could just look down and see what you were about. For now however, all she could do was ask questions.

"But why would the Time Lords…Oh [BEEP]! Forget I named them, okay? Why would they go to such lengths to talk us out of becoming an artificial race?"

"Look at the legends about these Lords. Everyone says they're a clone race. Genetic spinning jennies or something. And they live forever because little robots in their blood keep rebuilding their body. They've even removed the need for sleep. The people that rule history are bio-mechanical constructs and they don't want anyone else getting as powerful as them." GØK was in full flow now and the audience was hanging on his every word. "Take your renegade friend, Ms Ssardschattel. He may look good in his publicity stills, but the only difference between the [BEEP] and a Cyberman is that you wouldn't have to be a multiple fetishist to want to fuck him. Although in his case you would get the same anonymity kick." Madeline scowled, wondering how the Meep in the sound booth had let that 'fuck' get through.

"The Cybermen, or Counter-Intelligence Agents as they should be called, are a stream of lies. Faceless, identical monsters with no individuality. [BEEP] to that! A mechanically augmented human race would be more fantastically diverse than ever. Much more so than the repetitive two-arms, two-legs, no-imagination morass that most of are now."

"No way am I buying this! You're saying they destroyed my old life as a publicity stunt? That everything they do is a publicity stunt?"

Stacey was nearly hysterical.

Memo from Controller of Mondas Marketing to Dealy Plaza. (*Mondas, BC two million*)

Continue to be impressed with your work on the body horror propaganda. Single-mindedly devoting our entire culture to advertising is what has made us market leaders, and I can foresee a time where we could devote ourselves exclusively to this project.

But for today there's the more prosaic business of selling ice to Ice Warriors and sand to Silurians. As you may know, many divisions of MM believe we've exhausted the Solar System's markets and it's time to move on. Your big 'cyber' idea has made you enough of a golden boy for many to want to hear your thoughts on this problem at the board meeting tonight.

Extract froma report on Dealy Plaza's second meeting with Agent Payle. (*Mondas, BC Two Million*)

The client brought with him a rough chronology of the events that could lead to the elevation of humanity. The first human to be fitted with artificial components was **Hegistratus of Elis,** a Persian seer. **Herodotus** wrote in **424 BC** of how the seer was condemned to death by the **Spartans** and put in stocks. The seer escaped by cutting his feet off and attaching wooden ones instead and hobbling thirty miles on them to **Tregea. Payle** wanted to nip things in the bud and move against **Hegistratus,** but I felt sending a troop of Cybermen to eliminate one old mystic with wooden feet was a bit excessive. Especially since the **Spartans** caught him in the end and chopped off his head, which he found harder to replace.

From the data I identified the 1980s as a problem area. The innovations in solid state electronics would completely transform the way our target audience used information, and they would have to be blind not to notice the similarities between their own consciousness and the networks of computers, satellites and faxes that would become part of everyday life across the Earth. To ensure they were blind, or at least dazzled, our monsters would have to make quite an impression on humanity. The time for subtlety will have passed by 1986 at the latest, the year **First, Prather,** and **Eyestone** use embryo cells to clone a cow, and it should be then that the Cybernetic Men make a big "We're here! We're here and we're going to destroy your planet!" statement.

Agent Payle made a case for making that statement as early as the 1960s, when integrated circuits and the first heart transplant enter the picture, but he deferred to me when I again suggested that would be tipping our hand too early. Nevertheless we should consider a terror campaign around that time if we can think of a way to make sure not too many people notice it and a way to make integrated circuits scary. I provisionally scheduled this invasion for 1969, when **Shapiero** and **Beckwith** will be causing trouble by

isolating the first gene. This timeframe is very much subject to change however.

Prior to all this, little ‘teaser’ campaigns should be dropped into human history every so often. For example, a Cybernetic Man or two wouldn’t go amiss during the ‘Blitz’. The unprecedented number of amputees at that time will create an equally unprecedented interest in prosthetic development, and our market will need a warning not to take things too fast. We adjourned after we’d got as far as the end of the twentieth century. There was a little talk of attacking one of their Space Wheels in the year 2000, but if we hold them back sufficiently they won’t even have Space Wheels in the year 2000. Not sure what our next move after that will be. **Payle** advocated a move on their first moonbase at some point, which I’d be in favour of if we ran it as a smaller-scale repeat of the 1986 campaign, just for reestablishment’s sake. It’s important we make sure that every human school- child thinks there are Cybermen out there and that they wouldn’t want to be one.

Planet N, 4009

There was more. More and more data-pills were dispensed, and the mandalas increased in complexity. As Madeline Home ran around waving a mic, her gathered fans soaked up exact specifications for every part and trait of the Cyber-race, details of minor invasions launched against Mars and Neptune to judge audience reaction and plots for whisper campaigns in their dormant centuries.

Stacey had regained her calm and was taking it all in. The mob were ranting about how they weren’t “Gonna take no more [BEEP] from no galactic puppet masters” and how they were all presumably going to stick jug handles on the sides of their heads as soon as they got home. An opinion now prevailed that Cyber was the new black. Stacey was thinking carefully.

Madeline walked back down to the podium and asked the machine-man if he had any final thoughts. GØK said, “Pick an illusion, any illusion. It’s still possible I could be lying. I could have faked those time experiments, fooled the entire scientific community, and forged those documents myself. Now you’ve read them you’ve got a choice. You can either see me as a deluded and deceptive monster or you can see the Cybermen as ‘poster boys’ for people like you neglecting your full potential. Those are the two choices. Those are the only two choices facing everyone watching today.”

“Not quite ” Stacey said She’d been ignored for long enough “There’s another possibility.” Madeline turned to face her. The crowd gave her their attention. “You see, I actually know a little about the people you think are behind this, while all you have is paranoia and nowhere near enough of it. The documents are genuine Or at least GØK didn’t forge them They must have come from the temporal echo, but… HELLO PEOPLE! *TEMPORAL ECHO*?

“It doesn’t matter whether they’re an authentic account of the origins of the Cybermen or not What matters is that when something comes to you through an unexplained and unlikely time travel fuck-up thingy, you’ve got to assume that Gallifrey *wanted* you to read it. I can’t believe you missed it Mister GØK but this propaganda is either a second chance or a double bluff ”

Impossibly, GØK felt a cold shiver cascade down his tungsten spine. In an instant he abandoned all intentions of publishing ‘The Mondas Conspiracy Exposed’ and in another he saw that that was the least of his worries.

Madeline Home knew then that “Madeline! #583 Are we CYBER *SUCKERS*!?!” would never be broadcast. Perhaps they’d fill its slot with a repeat of the popular and less controversial “Madeline! #579: Boyfriend, you ritually MURDERED me…*THREE TIMES]”*

The captions in front of the guests, “Doesn’t want robot monsters in her town” and “Says we should all be cyborgs”, dissolved away to nothing.

“I’m what they wanted me to be!” shrieked GØK. “Am I? Am I? What am I?”

“Not a monster Not a great leap forward Just another they’ve bought and sold.” Stacey Ssardschattel nee Townsend looked him in the eye. “Welcome to the neighbourhood.”

She got up and walked out of the studio. The audience left quietly.

EARTH

COVERT OPERATIONS by JAMES AMBUEHL

"Hold tight, Jo," shouted the Doctor above the roaring engine "I've had to reverse the polarity of Bessie's main drive systems. It makes for a rather bumpy ride, but I'm afraid we have no alternative. We must reach UNIT HQ quickly and get the Brigadier to put out an APB on the Master before he manages to reach his TARDIS and leave Earth " He slowed slightly, to downshift for the gently-sloping hill just ahead, then sped up again. "Lethbridge- Stewart will be furious as it is, when he hears the Master has escaped from his island prison!"

"But why not let him leave Earth, Doctor?

Jo shouted back, clutching her hat tightly to her head lest it go flying away in the strong breeze. "Just let him go and bother someone else for a change?"

"I wish we could, Jo, believe me, I do But can you imagine for one moment what utter chaos would ensue in the universe if we were to leave him to it? No, Jo, We dare not let him get away again. Now hold tight…"

His voice trailed off as the sprightly yellow roadster flew swiftly round a bend on its two leftward tyres. Jo let out a short, involuntary shriek, and the Doctor took a black-gloved hand from the wheel and patted her thigh gently. "There, there. It will be all… oh dear."

"What is it Doctor?" she asked, dreading the alarm apparent in his voice But she needn't have asked, for scarcely a moment later she heard the unmistakable wail of a police car siren approaching from behind.

Grumbling inaudibly, the Doctor seemed to be mulling over his options as he glanced into the rear view mirror.

"I'm certain I could outrun him," he shouted "but we're coming up to a small town. We may be perfectly safe, but I can't speak for any unfortunate pedestrians. There's nothing for it. We'll have to stop and explain…"

The Doctor eased his cat to a halt by the side of the road, his face darkening visibly as the obviously well-fed officer slowly exited his own vehicle and moved toward them.

"Oh do come on. Constable — I don't have all the time in the world, you know!" he snapped.

"Doctor, please …" pleaded Jo, but the sharp- tongued sobriquet seemed to have the desired effect and the policeman arrived, red-faced and chest heaving.

"Right, sir," the officer growled between gritted teeth. "You're not going to give me any more trouble, are you? Good, now. Licence please." The Doctor rummaged quickly through his voluminous pockets, but all he could come up with was a UNIT ID card.

"Ah, you see, officer," he began slowly, scratching the bridge of his nose with a long forefinger, "I seem to have left my driver's licence in my other suit. But I assure you that I'm perfectly capable of handling Bessie at even greater speeds. Why, we're practically in no danger at all. Frictionless brakes, you see —"

"You mean to say you go rushin' about in this thing like you're Stirling Moss? It's quite clear that you're dressed for something special with your fancy duds an' all, Grandad, but I'm thinking you started your party early. Maybe you should blow into this little plastic bag…"

"Now see here, Constable, I have not been drinking! We are very late for an important engagement and unless you stop this harassment right this minute, you will be responsible for letting a dangerous criminal go free!"

"Right, miss," Ignoring the Doctor's tirade the officer tumed to Jo. "Have you a licence?"

"I'm afraid, Constable," she answered, "I seem to have forgotten my glasses. I'm frightfully nearsighted without them."

She smiled at him and added: "But, if you'll just listen to the Doctor, I'm sure all this will be —"

"Right, then, I shall have to ask you both to step out of the car and accompany me to the station."

"My dear chap," began the Doctor, with forced calm, "as I've said, we've no time for this dilly-dallying!" He heaved a heavy sigh then, and rubbed the back of his neck with his palm. "Since you seem to have an objection to my driving Bessie, then perhaps you would not mind if she were to drive herself!"

With that he took Jo's hand in his, and they climbed into the back seat as the now-driverless Bessie pulled out onto the road. The astonished policeman stood there dumbfounded. Constable Paul Finney was still standing there fifteen minutes later when a lorry driver drove past, blasting his horn and jarring him to his senses once again.

***

The yellow roadster screeched to a halt in the car park of Town Hall, barely avoiding the Brigadier's staff-car in the process.

"Come on, Jo!" the Doctor shouted. "Of all the hair-brained… calling a press conference at a time like this! We'd better get inside and deliver the bad news."

"Coming, Doctor," Jo answered cheerfully, but he had already gone inside. She grabbed her handbag and feather boa and rushed after the Doctor nearly colliding with his back as he stood propping the heavy inner doors open. His face was a picture of horror at the sight that greeted them within.

The room was packed to the gills with all sorts of reporters and their cameramen. At the head of the proceedings, was Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart, appearing quite flustered and not at all his usual unflappable self. It was plain to see just why. The press conference had been called in order to deny once more the existence of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce, but it was clear that the Brigadier was being fielded with such a barrage of questions that he was hard-pressed to do just that!

"Brigadier, is it true that UNIT has become a sort of secret word police force, and that —"

"— And is it also true that you have captured alien spacecraft stockpiled in secret airbases the world over, and that —"

"I — I — er …" stumbled the Brigadier awkwardly, his eyes darting to and fro like a trapped animal — doubtless seeking the nearest escape route.

"That poor, poor man!" shouted Jo. "Doctor, we have to help him."

The Doctor sighed. "Yes. Yes, I suppose we do and I think I have just the thing for it. Jo, do you think you could stall them a bit and give me a little

time?"

"I'll try. Doctor," she answered, feeling a plan of her own coming on just.

"Good girl," he muttered, and in a flurry of crimson-lined cape he was gone.

"Please, please, ladies and gentlemen of the press," the Brigadier barked in sharp tones that were barely audible above the general roar. "I have no idea what this 'UNIT' is, or if it even exists, and furthermore I'm not even certain that life exists on planets other than our own!"

Silence reigned for a moment, then a woman's voice sounded within the hall: "Brigadier, don't you yourself have an alien working for you, and mightn't you yourself be an —"

"You people are impossible, do you know that!?" he roared in answer, burying his head in his hands. He stood there a moment like that as the questions were again tossed about like wildfire. When he raised his head up again, his eyes were burning with new light. "Yes! Yes, it's all true! I admit it. There … are you happy now?"

"Oh, Alistair, you're such a card," came Jo's bubbling exuberant voice from the wings as she came out to join him, pink feather boa and lit cigarette in hand despite the 'NO SMOKING' signs posted about the hall. "But don't you think, dahling, that we should let the people of the press in on our little secret?"

"Secret?" squeaked the Brigadier, as the crowd leaned forward in anticipation.

"Why yes, I mean our *movie,* silly." She turned to address the crowd, a perfect picture of complete confidence.

"I'm the producer, Josephine Grant, and this is Alis … I mean Alan Stewart, our director."

"A movie?" queried one of the reporters, sounding somewhat sceptical.

"Yes, that's right. But actually, it's a pilot for a TV programme," beamed Captain Yates, joining the others. "In fact, here's one of our cameras now."

He held up the remains of a Dalck eye-slalk . he just happened to be transporting to the Vault in his UNIT Land Rover the next morning, fairly confident that no one in attendance would recognise it for what it truly was.

"Right!" exclaimed Sergeant Benton, also joining in on the charade. "That's the reason we kept mum about the whole thing. Our cameras are state-of- the-art. And our 'soldiers' are really just actors. Haven't you ever wondered why you've seen them only in small groups, when you've seen

them at all? We're just a fledgling company, you see, and we have to hire extras for much of our work."

"What kind of movie are you filming then?" came another sceptical-sounding query from the press. "That's easy," answered the Brigadier. "It's a science fiction series."

"And not just any science fiction programme," said Jo, "but a series about an alien who travels through time and space in a police box, battling menacing monsters and righting wrongs wherever and whenever he may find them."

'Tm truly flattered by what you all think of me," came a new voice. The small 'film crew' parted to reveal an imposing Edwardian figure as he stepped up to speak.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press, I do appreciate what my colleagues are attempting to do, but I think it's high time we stopped leading you good people on. It's time you knew the truth! "

To one side the Brigadier began to protest, but one look from the tall, white-haired figure silenced him at once. The Doctor continued.

"You see, I really am an alien, a Time Lord to be precise, and UNIT really does exist. In fact, I am their scientific adviser."

"Er … Smith, I really must protest this —" began the Brigadier, but the Doctor silenced him again with an upraised hand. An excited murmur began to run through the crowd

"Ladies and gentlemen," continued the Doctor, "I have your proof right here, in a series of UNIT film-reels that I have just collected our nearby HQ." the Doctor signalled to someone wearing a UNIT uniform at the back of the room. A film projector clattered into life and the fights went down.

"Now here we see a Yeti in the London Underground on the occasion of my first meeting with the Brigadier — then a Colonel in the regular Army. I wore a different face and body then."

And here we see a contingent of Cybermen, from my first meeting with UNIT proper, led by the now Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart."

"Autons, ladies and gentlemen, from my first official assignment with UNIT in my present body — and Silurians, and then Axons, Ogrons, Daleks, and so on."

The lights came back up.

"And so you see with your own eyes, good people of the press, why we had to keep UNIT's activities hush-hush. And I apologise to you for doing

so." The stunned silence was broken by a loud chuckle followed by a number of sarcastic comments. The entire room broke down into laughter and the members of the press started to file out, still enjoying the joke amongst themselves.

One of file reporters came forward, a rather serious looking BBC man. He let out an unexpected laugh and clapped the Doctor on the shoulder.

"Good one .. . Smith, wasn't it? You really had us going there. And that costume you've got on, and that twaddle about 'different faces' and all — thought you were a bit soft in the head. But those slides: I think I could spot the zip on that lizard- man, and those robots wore tennis shoes, didn't they? Anyway, good luck with your TV programme." As he walked away, he could be heard muttering: "Travelling through time and space in a police box .. .They'll never buy it!"

Only after the hall had emptied did the Brigadier finally speak.

"Well, Doctor, I have to hand it to you — again. You certainly pulled our fat out of the fire this time."

"Yes," acknowledged Mike. "But tell us. Doctor, why didn't you —?"

"Why didn't you simply let us go on with my film crew charade?" cut in Jo. "I mean, we could have fooled them with that, couldn't we have?"

"Yes, Jo, I believe you could have, but there would still have been some doubt; some who wondered. And as the Brigadier here can doubtless tell you, the best way to hide the truth is not to hide it at all!"

"Keep them guessing, you mean. Doctor?" put in Sergeant Benton.

"Yes indeed. Sergeant Benton, yes indeed," replied the Doctor, remembering that he still had to break the news of the Master's escape to the Brigadier. "Still, we can all thank goodness that the aliens look less real and fearsome than they actually are!"

MARS

WASTELAND EXPRESS by E.A. BLAIR

"And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you,
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you.
I will show you fear in a handful of dust

THE WASTELAND T.S. Eliot

It had started with the book.

Bored one night (or day; it was sometimes hard to tell travelling between destinations in the TARDIS) Samantha Angeline Jones had gone browsing through the book shelves that lined one side of the foreboding, gothic styled console chamber.

She'd found it squeezed between a signed first folio of Shakespeare and a well-thumbed Danielle Steele. It was a battered old book, but that meant little within the confines of a time machine where it was possible to find a recently printed first edition of Conan-Doyle's "Case of the All-Consuming Fire" alongside a 500 year old copy of "The Peculiar Memories of Thomas Penman." It seemed to have been specially bound in synthetic black leather with the title and author picked out in gilt, peeling with age, on the cover.

She'd flicked back and forth through the pages, strangely drawn to it for no apparent reason It hadn't been treated with respect Certain pages were tom, or dog-eared; there were a number of annotations to the text on post-it notes and far too many tea stains. Sam noted with interest that the title page had been signed and dedicated by the author. "To the Doctor, thanks for all the 'interesting times,' all my love "

“Who’s Bernice Summerfield?” she had asked her travelling companion the next time she saw him.

He had choked on the cup of tea that he had been draining at that moment. It took a full three minutes of coughing and back slapping before the Time Lord was in any fit state to answer. Even then he was remarkably evasive for such an innocent question.

“Just a friend.” he eventually replied as he flicked through the book. He seemed embarrassed by some memory that the name and book evoked. He cleared his throat with a “harumph” and repeated himself. “Just a friend.”

Sam scowled behind the Doctor’s back. All that Olympian detachment and sometimes all he really needed was a good…

Sam had stalked back to her room, wondering whether anything really happened between the Doctor and his friend.” She decided to take her mind off her frustration and examined the book further. History wasn’t usually her choice of reading matter, but this read more like Science Fiction and that she could handle “Down Among the Dead Men!” she read the title aloud. It was a much more emotive title than she was used to from her GCSE history books, sounding more Tomb Raider than real archaeology. It looked and felt like a dry and heavy academic tome, but Sam found herself drawn into the history and mystery surrounding the “Ice Warriors” of Mars. She covered a thousand years of Martian history before falling into a deep dreamless sleep.

She awoke to find the book had fallen to the floor, lain open at a particularly striking image. It showed a large group of Martian warriors preparing from battle. Above them, the salmon pink sky was darkening as it was blotted out by the approaching enemy. Figures in battle gear descending through the thin atmosphere beneath the silken wings of para-gliders. Men. Humans were attacking the Martians.

Sam read the caption; “The Oncoming Storm. Attribution: Unknown. Dating from the late twenty-first century this painting in oils, an almost dead medium in this period, depicts the opening battle of the Thousand Days War (2086 to 2088) with the attack by the U.N. Third Tactical Brigade on Liis-Arrat-Ixx (a Martian military nest burrowed deep into the regolith half-way up the extinct volcano Olympus Mons) as retaliation for the destruction of Paris. Nothing is known of the artist, not even his or her race. This piece records the scene so objectively, without demonizing one side or

the other, that we can never be sure whether the artist was human or Martian. (Reproduced with the kind permission of the Braxiatel Collection.)" The picture had a terrible beauty. It was so evocative that Sam could almost feel herself being drawn into it. Feeling the cold air biting into her skin, the wind rushing past her masked face, smelling the musk and oil as the warriors prepared their sonic weapons and swords, the fear as touchdown came closer, hearing the oaths of death before dishonour, the orders transmitted from the base ship in orbit.

Two armies about to join together in a terrible conflict.

She shivered and pulled her duvet around her.

It wasn't difficult to persuade the Doctor to take her there. He'd prevaricated for a while, giving her extensive reasons why they should avoid the planet during a number of time periods, but they'd finally decided on a safe time to visit that wasn't too long after the events depicted in the painting. Sam felt a pang of disappointment as they stepped out of the TARDIS and onto the streets of Jacksonville on an October evening in 2099. She couldn't articulate exactly what she had expected of her first view of Mars, but she was pretty sure it wasn't a mass of utilitarian buildings huddled under a geodesic dome. The town reminded her of a sixties-built university campus that she had visited with the school once. Only Jacksonville had remained unchecked and spread and gone mad.

It was only when the Doctor finally took her to the edge of the town, where the dome looked down across the Amazonis Planitia, that she began to get a sense of the place. A wide open plain, bigger than anything she had seen before stretching as far as the strangely curved horizon. Out there were the countless unmarked graves of the thousands who had given their lives on both sides of the Thousand Days war.

'Fear and terror." murmured the Doctor as if reading her mind.

"What?" He pointed up into the sky. Sam could make out two irregularly shaped points of light passing over. Not terribly high above the horizon and moving quite fast.

"Phobos and Deimos. Fear and terror. The twin sons of Ares that always accompanied him into battle. This planet always seems to bring out the darkest parts of the universe. Countless interplanetary wars, invasions, death by the century." The sight had put the Doctor in a rare melancholy mood. Red planet blues, Sam thought.

“It seems appropriate.” The Doctor nodded mutely. “I never knew that such desolation could be so beautiful.”

“Ahah! So it’s bewitched you also.” He had: sprung back into one of his more usual hyperactive schoolboy moods. “It gets everyone sooner or later.”

“I want to visit that battleground. In the picture. I want to go out and touch it. You said that the atmosphere is breathable, so let’s go out there.”

“Mostly breathable, but far too cold to go out without a suit.”

“But we could do it..” she pressed hopefully.

“Yes. We could… but when you’ve seen one old battlefield, you’ve seen them all.” Just for a split-second the Doctor looked all of his thousand-odd years of age.

“Then you stay here. Just point me in the right direction.” The Doctor seemed to pause to consider for a moment. Sam prepared herself for a pointless argument.

“Take the Transit feeder up to the summit. You should be able to find someone to help you there.”

“Pardon.”

“You don’t have to seem so surprised, Sam. I’m your friend, not your keeper. I’ll be here when you get back.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” the Doctor grinned at her.

“Time Lords honour?” Sam grinned back.

“Sam!”

“Just one thing?”

“Yes?”

“Where’s this Transit-thingy when it’s at home?”

As Sam stepped out onto the platform she could see that the Transit station was badly lit, serving one of the less used branch lines obviously meant the operators had less interest in its upkeep. Halfway up the platform, picked out by a pool of light cast by one of the remaining fully operational lights was a dark and solitary’ figure, neutral in gender at this distance and turned away so that Sam couldn’t see the face. It seemed to be holding itself expectantly, but then you would if you were waiting for a train.

For no reason that she could articulate, she felt apprehension as she moved to wait for the next train. The figure seemed somehow, unnatural, absorbing

the light from above, waiting in the quiet of the station.

Quiet. So quiet.

Sam had a sudden irrational compunction to confront the figure. Despite her instincts advising to the contrary, she walked quietly along the platform. planning to find some pretext to talk to the figure. She passed the figure and turned to it, opening her mouth to ask the time. She was struck dumb by the sight.

It was herself, or very nearly. Staring back at her like some kind of mocking fairground minor was a dark haired version of herself.

Her heart skipped with the shock, threatening to paralyse her whole body. A wave of panic washed over her and she turned, blindly running down the platform away from the nightmare made flesh. She strained to hear any sounds of pursuit over her own footfalls, but the silence of the station was shattered by the arrival of the train. She risked a glance over her shoulder and found herself alone on the platform. Heart pounding she boarded the train, not willing to feel safe until it pulled away from the station.

She scanned the empty carriage back and forth until the doors hissed closed, leaving her safely isolated in a urine smelling, graffiti stained cocoon. She sank down onto the least vile seat that she could find, closed her eyes and let out a long sigh of relief.

She blinked her eyes open at the first footstep.

The figure was there. At the opposite end of the carriage. Her other self stalked slowly towards her as Sam retreated until there was nowhere left to go. Maybe she could distract the other Sam until they go to the next station and then…

It… She was upon her. Pressing Sam against the carriage window.

“So, what’s your choice of weapon? Knife fingered glove? Scythe? Axe? Chainsaw?” She tried to keep her tone flippant and defiant, but as she felt her other selves hands close around her throat she couldn’t maintain her composure. She screamed, andscreamedandscreamedandscreamedandscreamedandscreamedandscreamedandscreamedandscreamedandscreamedandscreamedandscreamedscreamscreamscreamscreamscreamscream BLACK.

“Two minutes to DZ. Jack in and let’s bag us some greenies!” The unfamiliar voice was almost bellowing in her ear. She opened her eyes.

“What the f…” The rest of the expletive was drowned out by the noises of activity in the confined space she found herself in. She was surrounded by soldiers, all of them checking packs and weapons, wishing their comrades good fortune.

“First time out, kid?” asked an Irish brogue close to her left ear.

Sam looked blankly at the soldier that had addressed her. He couldn’t be mistaking her for a soldier.

“I said ‘First time out?”‘ It was impossible to get any kind of description of the man under the uniform, equipment and mirror-visored helmet. She looked down at herself, similarly dressed. No wonder he couldn’t tell.

“I shouldn’t be here. This isn’t my war.” Sam replied.

“That’s what I thought when I was dropped into Beijing in ‘63. Damn neo-commies Just keep your head down and stay close to the platoon sergeant. He’ll see you through. Just follow orders. That’s all that’s important.”

“No.” Sam tried to protest. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Drop stations.” shouted the voice from earlier, drowning her out. A door was sliding open, revealing empty space.

“See you on the ground.” yelled the brogue as the queue of soldiers pushed her closer to the door.

Sam tried to turn away. Struggled, kicked, tried to escape. But no one seemed to notice or care as she stood on the threshold looking down on the red planet far below.

“Go.” yelled the dropmaster and gave Sam

a sharp push between the shoulder blades. Sam twisted as she fell and caught sight of the face that had pushed her. Her own face, framed by short black hair.

And she was falling a thousand feet a second through the frigid Martian air towards Olympus Mons. A storm of weapons fire erupted from the surface below, reminding her of ack-ack fire in old black and white war movies from her youthful Saturday afternoons. Shots exploded around her and she could make out other troopers, engulfed in flames. Burning brightly as they fell to their fiery deaths. Static and screams across the Comm-net as the surface grew closer and closer. A plasma burst detonated below her, bright fight spilling across her vision. Flames licking around her. All she could see was the white.

Black.

The smell reached her first. Oily, musky.

Sam flinched at the view as her sight returned. A Martian warrior was standing over her, twice as real and three times as ugly.

“The humansss are coming.” it hissed, pointing to the sky. Overhead Sam could make out myriad points of fight. Drop ships and para-troopers she guessed.

“Why? Why is this happening?” Sam shouted to the stars. The only answers forthcoming came from the warrior as he passed her a compact weapon. Probably one of their famed sonic guns.

“We fight for honour… We die for honour… Honour isss all.”

“That’s not what I mean! “ Sam cried. “I shouldn’t be here. This isn’t my war!” She wanted to shake the warrior, make him understand.

“Ahhhh… You doubt the wisdom of our leaders.” Sam sighed and her shoulders slumped in defeat. He’d never understand or believe her. “I have heard many warriorsss question the Eight-point table’ssss attack on the humansss, but it isss not out placccce to quessstion. Only to obey.”

“But you’ll die!!!”

“Then I, Kchell-ett-Askaar, will die gloriously in the service of my people.”

“Sheep.” Sam muttered. “You’re all as bad as each other. Bloody sheep.”

Then the world went mad. The fighting reached them. Explosions tore chunks out of the ground around them. Weapons fire fizzed and sang overhead. The air was filled with the sounds of the fighting and the dying. With a dull crump a sonic grenade exploded ten feet away from Sam, throwing a huge gout of regolith into the air and knocking her to the ground.

Sam raised her head, trying desperately not to choke on the clouds of red dust thrown up by the explosion. An indistinct shadow loomed over her. weapon raised. She lifted her arm, vainly trying to block any attack. A larger, more solid shape stepped between her and the shadow. The warrior, Kchell, raised his sonic blaster in her defence.

She tried to scream a warning, but it was drowned in a mouthful of Martian sand. A heavy calibre weapon ripped through the warrior’s armour, almost tearing him in half. Kchell collapsed, his blood staining his homeland green. Was that a look of surprise beneath his helmet?

The shadow continued to move, becoming more distinct the closer it moved, revealing the uniform and colours of a blue-helmeted U N. trooper

Sam lifted her hands weakly, trying to surrender, trying to stop the horror. The trooper lashed out with a steel capped boot, sending Sam sprawling into the dirt. Head swimming, body aching, cars ringing, Sam looked up at her assailant.

The trooper paused for a moment, cocking its head.

"What are you waiting for?" she choked. "Finish it you bastard!"

The trooper lilted a gauntleted hand to its helmet. The polarised filters and heads-up-display slid up.

The world seemed to split in half.

She was looking up at a soldier with her face. Her dark-haired doppelgangcr from the Transit station. She was looking down at an Ice Warrior with her face. Her dark-haired doppelganger from the Transit station.

"What are you?" Sam asked the soldier.

"What are you?" Sam asked the warrior. "Remember them…" was the only reply she got before…

Black.

Black.

"Sam?"

That voice sounded familiar.

"Time to wake up, Sam."

Sam opened her eyes a fraction, the scene before her swimming and blurred. She could make out the vague shape of a face bent over her, the features all washing together in a mess of out-of-focus double and treble images. Another indistinct figure came into view.

"Please… If you don't leave this instant I'll be forced to call the Doctor…"

"Madam. I am the Doctor." A voice of outrage tempered by gentleness.

"Doctor?" Sam asked. Her voice cracked with the dryness of her throat.

"Sam!" Sam could make out the Doctor's mane of chestnut curls bouncing up and down with his excitement.

"What happened? The Transit… and the other me and the battle and… " The words tried to rush out so fast that they quickly became incoherent.

"Miss Jones. Please. You've been in a very nasty accident. You mustn't overexcite yourself."

"Accident?" Sam's confusion grew. "Where am I? Doctor. Who is she?"

“She’s a nurse. You’re in hospital… in Jacksonville. You do remember us coming to Mars?” Sam nodded. “The Transit carriage you took. Well. Without getting too technical it got derailed. You’re lucky to be in one piece.”

“How long…?” Sam managed to force the words through blistered bps.

‘How long have you been asleep? Four days.” Had it all been a hallucination? A coma dream? “Doctor… the things I’ve seen… I’ve got to tell you.”

“Later, Sam. There’ll be plenty of time later. You’ve got to rest.” The Doctor rose, retreating from the bed until he was indistinguishable from the background blur. “We’ll talk later.”

Sam sank back into a deep dreamless sleep.

Sam wiped the sweat from her brow and stepped back. She made a final alteration and turned to the Doctor.

“What do you think?” she asked.

He leaned in closely and examined Sam’s work closely.

“I thought you couldn’t paint?”

“I couldn’t. I mean. I can’t!” she flustered.

The Doctor just nodded and looked on thoughtfully. “You know, I’m sure I’ve seen this somewhere before.”

“Knowing you, you were there…”

“No… I’ve seen the picture…” He snapped his fingers as it came to <u>him</u>. “Sam. Pass me the book.” She did as she was asked and handed over the copy of “Down Among the Dead Men” and watched as the Doctor opened it immediately to the correct page. He consulted the book and then the painting before handing it back to Sam. She shook her head.

“Why can’t you believe me? I was there! This is what I saw!”

“I believe that you believe it, Sam, but I assure you that it’s impossible. You had a hallucination based on the print of this picture in the book.”

“But I talked to these people. I heard their hopes and fears. Saw their lives and deaths…”

“All based upon the book!”

Sam threw her palette and brush to the floor in frustration.

“Oh, Sam. At least we solved the mystery of where the picture came from.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“If you’re right and I hallucinated based on the painting then no one painted it. It’s just a copy of something I’d already seen.”

“Self-perpetuating paradoxes do occur naturally in rare…” The Doctor trailed off as Sam’s stare bore into him. “I suppose we’ll never know for sure.” Sam shrugged and took the book from his hands and replaced it where she had found it on the bookshelf. She turned back to the Doctor.

“I’ll be in my room.” she went to say, but the Doctor had already turned away and started feeding instructions into the console. Sam sighed and shoved her hands into her pockets. Kicking the floor as she went, she walked away down the corridor to the living areas. As she walked she became aware of something in her pockets other than her hands. She drew out her hand and opened it to find a small red Martian pebble sat amongst a small handful of Martian sand. She opened her mouth to call back to the Doctor, but thought better of it. She placed the pebble back in her pocket and continued to walk back to her bedroom.

“For every moment of triumph, for every instant of beauty, many souls must be trampled”

Mongolian Adage quoted from Hunter S. Thompson

PLANET FIVE

EXODUS by JOHN S. DREW

"The Egyptians?"

The Doctor didn't look up from his work, rather he just grunted a definite negative.

"Why not?" she asked with a groan of exasperation.

There was no answer as he continued with his work.

Bernice Summerfield sighed and shook her head as she returned to leaf through the large tome she was holding. She stopped as something else caught her eye.

"Exarius?" she said, hopefully.

This time he halted, trying to force a Mergon nut two sizes too small onto the bolt that lay exposed before him, and thought a moment. He shook his head "No, you'll find everything you need to know in the data banks I recorded an extensive entry on the planet. Very interesting." He gestured towards one of the many sided panels of the console before him. "I think panel number three where the data banks are stored these days You know, Jo travelled with me at that time, I believe " His eyes closed slightly and a thin smile of fond remembrance crossed his lips. "Josephine Grant. I wonder how she is doing." He drew himself out of his reverie, reached over to the little black bag at his side and rummaged through it. "Doomsday weapon, right?"

Bernice, or Benny as she was known by many, sighed in frustration. What was the point of having all of time and space at your disposal to study if one man had already mapped it out?

Not one man. One Time Lord. One irritating Time Lord who frustrated Benny with his constant objections. The Doctor promised her a trip to any planet, at any time, to study any culture. He felt she deserved the diversion after all the two had been through lately in their travels. It wasn't always safe to travel in the company of someone such as the Doctor.

So far, she had been through the letters A to E of the "Encyclopaedia to the Seven Galaxies" with little success. If it wasn't a personal reason for not going, it was one of galaxy shattering proportions. Or even worse, the Time Lords would not allow it. To top it off, the Doctor seemed to have a lack of interest in his own promise, preferring to tinker with the console as he often did when he was preoccupied with his own thoughts.

Bernice stared at the little man as he worked away at the hexagonal shaped console that guided the TARDIS through time and space. He had told her he was only affecting minor repairs, but there was something about watching him work while the TARDIS was in flight that disturbed her. It was times like these that she missed Ace, a former travelling companion. Although she possessed a hot temper, the young woman and the Doctor had an unusual affinity, one formed from travelling together for such a long period of time. Sometimes, the companionship between the two provoked a little jealousy in Benny.

Now Benny was on her own and she sometimes wondered why she was travelling with the Time Lord. It's not like the Doctor had always been honest with her or Ace in his dealings with them. Not that she had teen entirely honest with the Doctor when they first met. She had been passing herself off as an accredited archaeologist for so long that she fell into the role quite easily when she met the Doctor. Of course, she could tell there were a great number of secrets behind her companion's eyes. There was something about him that intrigued her, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Plus, having the whole of the galaxy and time to explore made it all the more appealing.

Of course, at the moment, she wasn't going anywhere. She looked back down into her encyclopaedia.

"When are you going to update this?" she asked. "I know I'm missing some entries."

The Doctor shrugged. "I always say it would be nice to upgrade to the Encyclopaedia of the Ten Galaxies series, but then I get upset as I read entries that are all wrong." A knowing smile crossed his lips. "So, what's

the point?" He mopped away a thin bead of sweat that was forming on his forehead.

She returned the smile and looked back into her book at entrees, E through G. "That's the problem with being a Time Lord. You know so much more than the average researcher." Her head snapped up suddenly, the smile growing wider.

"Planet Five." she said, her interest piqued.

The Doctor nearly dropped the Mergon nut. "What?!?" he asked nervously.

"The Fifth Planet of the Solar System," Bernice said with resolution. "I want to go to Planet Five."

"Out of the question," he dismissed the notion with a wave of his hand in front of him. "It doesn't exist anymore."

"In the past it did," Bernice said flatly. "At least, that's what the book says. Even in my time scientists hadn't confirmed theories about the asteroid belt between Jupiter and Mars. According to this book, the planet did exist and there was some sort of civilisation there.

"Oh." He reached back and ran a hand through his head of short, dark, curly hair. "How about the planet Mechanus?"

Bernice snorted. "Please. I read your diary. It didn't sound all that exciting when you first visited there." She walked around the console to face him in pursuit of her argument. "According to this, the planet was destroyed, but its destruction could not be explained." She looked at him. "Doctor, what happened?"

"I told you many of the entries are incorrect. The researchers don't know what they're talking about."

"Oh no you don't. Doctor. I'm not letting you off the hook that easily. What happened to Planet

Five?"

"It's not something you need to know, Benny. I'll tell you this much, the people of the Fifth Planet managed to destroy themselves." He held out his hands. "Look, let me see the Encyclopaedia. I'll pick us a nice destination."

Bernice shook her head. "No. You said we'd go anywhere I wanted and you've been stonewalling me for the last hour. In fact, one hour. That's all I ask."

"There's a reason they destroyed their own world, Bernice," the Doctor said using the grave tone he saved for lecturing.

Bernice turned away from him with a hand outstretched. “Save me the stories. Doctor. Planet Five is where I want to go. And you know how stubborn I can be when I want something so let’s get on with it! “

The Doctor considered pursuing the argument further, but stopped himself. He relaxed, his entire demeanour changing. Bernice saw it in his eyes for a fleeting second. It wasn’t a sign of concession, rather one of realisation. “Very well. Planet Five. But don’t say I didn’t warn you. Let me clean up this mess and I’ll get us underway.”

“Perfect,” Bernice said, suddenly feeling a little uneasy. Her victory had been too simple. She knew the Doctor was up to something. She turned towards the door that led further into the TARDIS. ‘I just need to get a few things together.”

“Yes, I suppose you do,” the Doctor said, suddenly very distracted, but not by the work before him.

Bernice backed out of the console room, leaving the Doctor to his task.

The Doctor said nothing for the remaining hour it took to reach their destination. He walked around the console, flicking the occasional switch and pushing the odd button, making short clucking noises as he did. Every once in a while, he’d mutter something to himself and then grumble in irritation as if in objection to what he had just said.

Bernice stood to the side, watching with a mixture of fascination and trepidation. She still marvelled at the way the Doctor had such a rapport with his time craft. That fascination gave her confidence that he was going to land them in an area of relative safety. But her fears quickly returned as she remembered the look in his eyes. She knew they weren’t going because it was what she wanted. The Doctor had plans of his own. Bernice thought about asking him, but knew better. If there was a new game afoot, she would soon learn when it was her turn to play.

Bernice couldn’t help but sigh. Someday I’m going to have a long talk with this man, she thought.

The Doctor looked up from his work and smiled. “We should be materialising soon. I think I’ve found a relatively safe area, one where the Fendahl will not be able to observe us observing them.”

“Fendahl?” Bernice asked.

“Fendahl are the native inhabitants.”

“Are they dangerous?”

“Very. They absorb the full spectrum of life itself.”

“So how safe a distance are we from them?” Bernice’s fears were taking hold of her again.

“Relatively,” the Doctor said with an unusual air of detached calm.

“Relatively?” Bernice repeated. The Doctor was usually much more confident than that.

“Well, give or take a meter or two,” he said the smile growing wider and more mischievous. “It’s going to be a little tricky.”

He’s toying with me! Bernice realised. That’s it! Well, I won’t fall into the trap. I can be just as calm and collected as him. “So tell me more about the Fendahl.” she said aloud.

“The Fendahl were a race of creatures that once had the potential for greatness.” The Doctor paused, his voice dropping to an almost conspiratorial tone. “But then something happened. It’s almost as if evolution backfired on them. They began to feed upon themselves, absorbing their life essences. The planet was dying out.” For a moment, Bernice saw the troubled look in his eyes again. “At some point in the future. I’m going to have to deal with them on Earth.” The Doctor repressed a shudder.

“Earth? The Fendahl invaded Earth?”

The Doctor nodded. “Tried to. After almost wiping out the Martians, a lone Fendahl travelled to Earth.”

“The Fendahl on Mars?” Bernice interrupted him. “When did this happen?”

“There was only one. The same one that travelled to Earth. It should reach Earth around 12 million BC,” the Doctor said quietly.

Bernice’s eyes widened. “One? There was a great disaster that struck Mars during that time. They had no real words for it, but from the descriptions in their ancient texts, it sounded like a space vampire or something. And you say one Fendahl did all that?”

The Doctor nodded grimly. “I’m afraid so. The Fendahl convert other beings into snakelike creatures called Fendahleen, each very powerful in its own right. A group of Fendahleen finds a focal point for their power, a highly psionic being that they convert into a Fendahl Core. Once the Fendahl has a Core, there’s no stopping its power.”

“Which explains why the Fendahl are dying out. They are feeding off each other and trying to create Fendahleen, but can’t.” She paused. “Maybe this

isn't such a good idea."

The centrally located time rotor stopped its rhythmic up and down motion and a soft chime sounded. The Doctor reached over and activated the viewscreen. "A little too late now. Let's see if I got it right."

The huge monitor opened to reveal a sweeping landscape with red skies offering a backdrop of thick, thunderous grey clouds. The land itself was desert-like and featureless, save for one noticeable exception.

Bernice stepped up behind the Doctor and pointed at the screen. "What the hell is that?"

The Doctor nibbed his chin thoughtfully. "It would appear to be an artificial structure."

"Artificial?" Bernice was confused. "I thought the Fendahl were creatures of habit, instinct." Her voice trailed away as her fears rising again. "You know, evolution going off course and all that stuff."

"Yes," the Doctor said dryly. "Interesting, isn't it?" He reached over, grabbed his red question mark handled umbrella, slipped on his dark tan jacket and topped his head with his fedora; all with a fluid like motion, "Something we must ask when we knock on their door?"

He reached for the control that opened the TARDIS doors, but stopped as Bernice's hand touched his. It surprised him, as she was not a tactile kind of person. "Should we?" she asked. "This is wrong."

"We must," he replied coolly. "Before, I would have agreed with you, but that structure does not belong there. We must investigate." He paused, his head tilting in a smile. "This is what we came to study, isn't it? What happened to the Fendahl in their last days? Well, I think you have something to write about right out there."

"You know, Mechanus isn't sounding so bad now," she said quickly.

"Bernice," the Time Lord chided. "You can always stay here." He activated the door control. The two portals parted with a soft whirring motion.

"You know I'm not going to do that," she said.

The impish smile grew even wider, if such a thing were possible. "I know. Come on."

The blast of warm air that assaulted Benny as she stepped out of the TARDIS did little to alleviate the chill that was running down her back.

Just one quick hour. That's all I asked. Now, it's feeling like every second spent here is an hour. This is all wrong. I can feel it.

The Doctor pointed his umbrella in the direction of the structure. "I know little about Fendahl, pre-evolutionary turn, but I'm sure that is not Fendahl architecture. In fact, it looks like those old," he paused and chuckled, "well, old for me, observation domes from circa 26th century Earth." He turned and planted his umbrella point on the ground, leaning on the handle towards Benny. "Wouldn't you say?"

Bernice squinted in the direction he had pointed. "Come to think of it, it is! That's a prefabricated observation dome. They're equipped with everything you'd need to observe a primitive culture, including a cloaking device so as to keep the natives from seeing you! But what the hell is it doing here and in plain sight? In the past?"

"A good question," the Doctor replied. "Come on. I'm sure the people operating it can explain all."

That's if they're alive.

Doctor Vance Hawkins leafed through the various reports that lay upon his desk, grunting or chuckling as he paused to review particular pieces of information. Those that caused him to laugh were immediately tossed in the recycling receptacle that stood to the side of his desk.

Hawkins rose to his full six feet and stroked the thin salt and pepper beard that adorned his ebony face. He let out a yawn mixed with fatigue and boredom and tried to stretch the kinks in his back. Six months. That's all she said we needed when she proposed this expedition, he mused. It's been nearly a year now and we're nowhere near any firm conclusions on Planet Five or its people, if you can call them that. More like the simple indigenous lifeform.

He was drawn from his thoughts by a hurried knock on his door. Susan Hoblock, Hawkins' intern, poked her young, excited face in the door. "Doctor Hawkins. I think you should come and see this!"

Hawkins sighed again. Last time she thought she heard the creatures singing outside the dome. What was I thinking in picking her to be an assistant? He paused and shook his head. I know what it was, those great legs of hers. Great legs, long blonde hair and a beautiful pair of… He stopped himself and tried to concentrate on the job. Women were his one great weakness.

“What is it, Susan?”

“Marina,” she stopped herself. “I mean. Doctor Franz. She caught one!”

Hawkins eyes nearly burst lfom his head as his face contorted with a surprised look. “What?” He knew he was going to have to end it with her. Beauty and sex were one thing, but the emptiness of this woman was staggering. “Susan, the native inhabitants are energy beings. You don’t just trap one as you would say, a racoon.”

“Doctor Franz has. She has it in a stasis cell!”

He looked her up and down and saw she was being genuine in what she said. “Did she send you?”

“Of course,” she replied.

Hawkins ran for the door.

The Doctor and Bernice stepped up to the dome’s entrance. The Doctor ran the tip of his umbrella along the surface of the barrier. It was grey and featureless, save for the identifying serial number etched into the side in bright red letters.

“SX-235,” Bernice read aloud. “A common observation prefab structure.”

“And this one stands out like a sore thumb,” the Doctor mused. “Why?”

“If the Fendahl are at a stage where they are animalistic in nature, it wouldn’t matter if they used the cloaking unit or not. I remember it used up a great deal of energy. The only problem now is getting in. It isn’t like you can walk up to an observation post and ring a doorbell. It sort of defeats the purpose.”

“I see,” the Doctor nodded. “The only way in is with an invitation. Magnetic locks on the inside release allowing access.”

“So that’s it, then,” Bernice said with some hope. “We’re not invited guests. Mechanus it is”

“Nonsense,” he replied, tapping on the door. “Once they know who I am, they’ll welcome us with open arms.”

Bernice looked over her shoulder, expecting a Fendahl to be considering them as a possible midday snack. A soft whirr drew her attention. “Doctor!” she shouted a warning.

Above, two automatic laser rifles were targeting them. Bernice pushed the Time Lord as twin energy beams erupted from the barrels. Just escaping the blast, they hit the dirt hard as the ground they had been standing on exploded into dirt and debris.

Assuming their target destroyed, the lasers returned to their stationary position.

The Doctor looked up and coughed. “How rude. Thank you, Benny.” He rose to his feet and offered her his hand.

“What now?” Bernice asked as she brushed away the dirt from her knees.

The Doctor fumbled about in his pockets. “Key.”

“Of course. Skeleton, I assume?”

“Electromagnetic, actually.” He pulled out a small black box with several controls and a pulse gauge on it. He began to manipulate the knobs. “Just have to make sure I have it set correctly. Too big a pulse will disrupt more than the door’s magnetic lock.”

“Toilets won’t flush?” Bernice asked jokingly.

“Something like that,” the Doctor replied.

Hawkins stepped into the examining room where the rest of his research team was gathered. Robert Andriosi stood off to the comer, arms folded in his usual petulant way. His long hair was tied back in a ponytail, a recent accession to Hawkins, who felt the style was unprofessional. A pair of thick bifocals teetered on the edge of his nose. He was watching the current contest between the two female scientists of the research team.

Andrea Lipinski and Marina Franz were in another heated argument. Hawkins could easily guess what it was about. Lipinski, usually a demure short-haired woman, was holding her own against me taller Franz who trid to leverage her height to bring her argument home.

“The status field is set at a level that is strong enough to keep the being alive, but non-functional,” Franz argued, her voice raising to a yell. Lipinski, the calmer of the two, would not relent. “You don’t know that, Marina. I suggest you place it in total suspension. We’ve observed these things eating each other with an almost animalistic abandon. I’d hate to see what it would do to us if it got loose.”

“We don’t know what that will do to it, Andrea. We’re going to have to take some risks here! I mean, that is what we came here for, right? Tests show the planet was destroyed by natural causes. We detected no signs of any natural disaster from space. The only area left to explore is the population itself. These creatures are composed of an unusual form of energy. Maybe they caused the world to split apart.”

“Ladies, please, stop this at once,” Hawkins said, waving his arms in a calming gesture as he stepped in between the two.

“Don’t ‘Ladies’ us, Doctor Hawkins,” Marina Franz rumbled, her eyes flashing in anger. If there was one thing she hated more than being contradicted by a colleague, it was being placated by a member of the male sex.

“Of course, Doctor Franz. My apologies.” Hawkins tried not to grit his teeth too hard as he bit down his quick reply. “I meant no offence.”

“I realise that, Doctor, but it still doesn’t excuse your lack of courtesy. We are not ladies, we are colleagues.” She looked toward Andriosi. “In some cases, superiors.”

Robert Andriosi stepped over to the stasis chamber, pointing to the monitoring controls. “This is a big mistake. It doesn’t take someone with four doctorates to know that! These things are too dangerous to examine at such close range.”

“It’s what we’re going to need to do if we ever hope to come up with anything conclusive on their species!” Marina wailed. “Simple observation at a safe distance is not giving us any information.”

“However did you manage it, Marina?” Hawkins asked.

The tall, attractive scientist broke into a proud smile. “We know that this race feeds upon themselves. Well, it was just a matter of waiting for one of them in a weakened state to fall into a little energy trap I devised. The trap has a portable stasis field so it can’t fight its way out.”

Hawkins nodded appreciatively. “Very good. Doctor Franz. I wish you’d told us about this, of course, but we can discuss that later. What about the others’ fears?”

“They are just that, fears,” Marina sneered. “There is no evidence to suggest that anything can go wrong.”

“And there is none to suggest that it won’t,” Andriosi countered. “Doctor Hawkins, Doctor Franz may have talked you into all this, but you lead this little expedition. I want you to consider how dangerous this can be.”

Hawkins walked over to the stasis field. “Let me see it.”

Doctor Franz turned and activated a monitor. The viewscreen nearby lit up revealing a small ball of energy. Its glow was dim but pulsed slightly every few minutes. Hawkins tried to make a form out within the mass of energy, but the glow was just bright enough to obscure it.

“What has your analysis revealed so far?” Doctor Franz shook her head. “Nothing conclusive yet. I can’t identify the type, but I have been able to determine that it feeds on various forms of energy. I’ve tried some of the small animal specimens we’ve brought from Earth and the little thing just sucks them dry, leaving little more than ashes. Right now, the field is set so as to keep the creature from even moving.”

Hawkins looked at Andriosi and shrugged. “Seems harmless enough to me.”

Andriosi’s face dropped. “That’s all you have to say. Suppose there was a catastrophic systems failure. What then?”

“Then,” Hawkins replied evenly, “what we’ve feared could happen the entire time we’ve been on this planet will happen. This was a risk we were prepared to take when we agreed to come back to this time period.”

“There is a great deal of difference between those things outside and one in here among us, Doctor Hawkins, and you know it!” Andriosi said, the panic and fear in his voice becoming quite obvious.

“Robert,” Hawkins started and then stopped. He turned to Doctor Lipinski. “Andrea?”

The attractive scientist appeared a little apprehensive at first. Lipinski nodded and knelt down beside the container. She closed her deep blue eyes and breathed in deeply. The room seemed to hold its breath a moment as though waiting for some momentous reply.

Suddenly, Andrea opened her eyes wide and let out a gasp. She staggered back as if startled. “Andrea!” Robert was to her side, holding her hand in support. “What was it?”

Andrea breathed in deeply, trying to catch her breath. She was finding it hard to gather her thoughts. Andriosi glared up at Hawkins. “Damn it! Now do you see what I mean? That thing’s dangerous!”

Hawkins nodded. “You argue that the creature is dangerous. We needed to find out. Andrea’s psionic capabilities were the only way we could communication with it.”

“At what cost?” Andriosi snapped back. “She can’t even…”

“I’m all right.” Andrea looked at Robert and then at those around the room. Her hand trembled in his. “Hunger. Intense hunger. There is nothing else there. It’s animalistic, primitive.”

“Intriguing,” Marina said in a soft tone. “It’s true then. An energy being with primitive tendencies.”

“It’s dangerous,” Andriosi said “We need to get it out of here!”

“No!” Marina yelled.

Suddenly, the fights in the room dimmed. They then sputtered and winked out.

“What the hell?!?” Hawkins said

“Look!” Susan screamed.

The stasis field about the box containing the creature dissipated.

Hawkins reached for an intercom on a wall nearby. “Security! Security!” There was no reply It too was powerless

“Run!” Marina urged, backing up towards the door to the room. “We’ve got to get out of here!” The box blew open and the darkened room filled with pulsing light.

Susan ran from the room with Marina quickly behind her Hawkins stood by the entrance and watched as Andrea and Robert both stood before the pulsing being, transfixed.

“Robert! Andrea! Come on!” Hawkins called out.

Robert stood rooted to his spot in total fear “I can’t move, Vance! My legs won’t budge!” Andrea’s situation was different. From where Hawkins stood it appeared as though Andrea was at peace with the situation. The being fascinated her. She started to move towards it.

It moved first, diving quickly and tearing through Robert A flash of light and a billow of smoke emerged from the junior scientist. He let out one terrified scream as his smoking lifeless husk dropped to the floor. His body began to shrivel and change before the elder scientist’s eyes. “Andrea!” Hawkins tried once more to direct her attention, but she was transfixed Seeing the futility in staying, Hawkins quickly shut the door behind him. He ran down the darkened corridor.

The Doctor and Bernice stepped into a pitch-black entranceway.

“Doctor,” Bernice said warningly.

“I may have used too much power,” he replied sheepishly “Hopefully, it’s only a local power loss.”

“Hopefully?” Bernice said. “Why?”

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t want to leave the base defenceless against the Fendahl, now would I?” He reached into his pocket and produced a small torch, shining the bright light down the corridor. “Door.”

The door opened suddenly and three laser sights quickly targeted the Doctor and Bernice. The two looked at each other and slowly raised their hands above their heads.

"I take it you don't like door-to-door salesmen?" the Doctor asked softly.

Hawkins ran up behind Marina and Susan, startling the two women.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Marina shrieked.

Hawkins held a hand out, begging a moment to catch his breath. He moved his hand to his heart, using the other to support himself against the wall.

"Sorry," he wheezed, trying to keep his voice to a whisper. "What happened back there?"

"It's pretty obvious," Susan said, her voice cracking with wild panic. "That thing got loose and got Andrea and Robert!"

"No, no," Vance said, cutting her off. "It got Robert. But it didn't kill him outright. From what I saw it changed him. And Andrea. It didn't harm Andrea. There was almost, a sense, a feeling of familiarity between the two." Marina leaned back on the heels of her feet. "It might be her psychic ability. She may have been able to reach it on some level."

"I thought you said these things had regressed to an animalistic nature," Susan said.

"They have," Hawkins replied. "But maybe Andrea was able to reach it anyway, She once told me she was able to reach her pet Doberman when it became very angry. She calmed it down. Maybe she found that level with the being."

"There's a big difference between an Earth dog and a life eating monster!" Susan's voice rose to shriek.

Hawkins snapped at her, "Get it together, woman! Your hysteria is not going to help us!"

"And I suppose sitting here on our asses in the dark and making guesses about what's going on will? Where are the guards? We brought enough security people to take care of us! Where are they?"

"I don't know," Hawkins said. "Communications are down." He stopped and cocked his head upward. "What's that sound?"

"Footsteps," Marina said softly.

Susan got to her feet. "Maybe it's Andrea." Hawkins reached out and grabbed the young woman's arm. "Wait a minute! Where are you going?"

She pulled away from him "It is Andrea! It is! I can see her!" She ran off Hawkins tried to grab her, but Marina pulled him back.

"No. Vance! Stay here!"

"She'll be killed!" he hissed.

"There's nothing we can do for her now," Marina said helplessly "We need to get out of here!"

Hawkins started to move and then stopped. "We can't."

"What do you mean, can't? You have a way of getting us out of here, right?"

Hawkins shrugged, not sure of what to say next. A scream from down the corridors distracted them. Hawkins glanced quickly around the comer and gasped. He rose to his feet and grabbed Marina. "We've got to get out of here!"

The Doctor stumbled into the dimly lit room with the help of the laser rifle barrel thrust into his back. Bernice followed quickly behind him. One of the guards closed the door quickly.

The Doctor reached to doff his hat in greeting, but stopped as a number of weapons gestured at him He returned his arms to their upright position

"Gentlemen," he began, "this really isn't necessary."

"Quiet," one of them growled. "I'll ask the questions here and I'll tell you what's necessary!"

The Doctor observed that the other guards watched the speaker intently Must be the leader. They're taking their cues from him. He sighed. "I suppose you want to know who we are and what we are doing here."

"For starters," the leader agreed. He placed the muzzle of his rifle under the Doctor's chin "Telling me what you did to the station's systems wouldn't be a bad idea either."

"This wasn't my doing," the Doctor replied simply. "I admit we, my companion Bernice Summerfield," he gestured towards the archaeologist who tried her best to smile, "and I, did break into the complex with the use of a short electromagnetic pulse. But it shouldn't have totally disrupted your systems." His eyes narrowed. "Have the Fendahl breached your security?"

"The what?" the head of security asked.

"The inhabitants of this planet are called Fendahl," Bernice said

"You keep quiet," the leader barked. "This is the Fifth Planet. We…"

He was interrupted by the sound of heavy pounding on the door. “Gerrold! Open the door!” a pleading voice called from outside.

Two guards stepped up to either side of the door, weapons ready. At a signal from their leader, one of them activated the door. A man and a woman bolted into the room as the door closed behind them. They nearly dropped to the floor in panic at the sight of all the weapons.

“Gerrold! It’s us!” the man shouted.

“At ease,” Gerrold ordered his men. They lowered their weapons a fraction, ready to snap them into place at a moment’s notice.

“Vance Hawkins?” Bernice stepped forward, clearly surprised. “What the hell is going on here? What are you doing here?”

He returned the look of surprise at the sight of Bernice. “Benny? Benny Summerfield? I could ask you the same question!” He rose to his feet and embraced Bernice, surprising even her. “It’s good to see you.”

“You know these people?” Gerrold asked.

Hawkins nodded. “I know Ms. Summerfield here. Not her friend. Benny, you remember Marina Franz?”

“Vaguely, I’m afraid. I never really followed all the circles you did Vance.”

“No,” he said, his tone dripping with irony, “you didn’t, did you? Now. what are you doing here?”

She looked at the Doctor who nodded. “This may sound crazy, but my friend here, the Doctor, has a time craft.”

Hawkins couldn’t help but smile. “Well, it would explain how you got here from the future.”

The Doctor pointed to Hawkins. “And you came here how?”

Hawkins looked at the time traveller, his smile getting wider. “Time travel.”

“Time travel is not common, even in your time. Mister Hawkins.”

“Professor Hawkins,” he corrected. “You are right. Doctor. Time travel is still in its infancy stage, but there is one group who has the ability to take you through time with a near one hundred percent success rate. They call themselves The Time Brokers.”

The Doctor closed his eyes and muttered a silent oath. “What’s the matter?” Bernice asked.

“I’ll have dealt with them shortly,” the Doctor explained. “But now I see the havoc they will have caused. Professor, you realise that the cost for this

trip is your lives. That's part of your agreement with The Time Brokers."

Marina looked at Hawkins in shock. "What is he saying, Vance?"

"We're on Planet Five, Doctor. Marina recently discovered that the planet did exist at some point by analysing some of the fragments from the asteroid belt. Radioscopic analysis revealed that the fragments were once part of a planet, one that supported life. We carbon-dated the fragments and worked out a point when the planet was destroyed. We're at a point just prior to the planet's destruction." Hawkins turned to Doctor Franz. "Relax, Marina. We're going to get off this planet before it's destroyed."

"And what about this giving of our lives?" Marina insisted.

"A technicality. One we can easily avoid. Relax." Hawkins tried to sound reassuring, but everyone in the room could hear the heavy hint of doubt in his voice.

"But why," Bernice asked. "Why are you doing this?"

"Planet Five, Bernice," Hawkins said. "One of the greatest mysteries of our time. What happened to the inhabitants, to the planet? We've always talked about the possibility of its existence. When I confirmed it, I took advantage of this great opportunity with The Time Brokers. I made the arrangements with Marina, Andrea Lipinski and Robert Andriosi. We hired these mercenaries as security. The Brokers agreed to bring our findings back to the future."

The Doctor could only moan and walk over to a comer, his head hung low and shaking. Bernice didn't understand his outburst entirely, but she knew he was upset. "But where's Robert? Andrea?"

Hawkins looked at Marina. "Robert's dead," she said softly.

"Dead? How?" Bernice cried.

Hawkins chewed thoughtfully on the inside of his cheek, rolling his eyes in embarrassment. Marina shrugged. "We had managed to capture one of the inhabitants, a fantastic energy creature, but it escaped."

The Doctor stepped up to the female archaeologist. "Then it's loose in the complex?"

She nodded. "Yes. There was an odd power surge and the containment field holding it dropped. It got Robert and Andrea."

"It didn't get Andrea," Hawkins said. "I saw the way Andrea just stood there as it took Robert. It didn't want to harm her."

"It must have taken her," Marina insisted.

“This woman, Andrea. You say she just stood there. Did she, by any chance, have a high psionic potential?”

“More than potential. Doctor,” Hawkins replied, “Andrea was a well endowed Psionic. She could read minds, send her thoughts over short distances, telekinesis, that sort of thing.”

“I’m afraid Doctor Hawkins’ assessment of the situation is correct,” the Doctor said definitively. “What you are dealing with is a native of this planet, the Fendahl. This world is dying. The Fendahl are feeding on each other, their very life essences. But the Fendahl has the ability to channel their power in order to increase their strength. The Fendahl changed Andrea. Made her a focal point for its power. Your man, Robert, has been changed too I would imagine. He’s become a Fendahleen.”

“He did change into something else. But I don’t understand,” Hawkins said. “They are life eaters?”

The Doctor waved a hand in frustration at having to explain. He calmed down at a warning glance from Bernice and sighed. His accent became thicker and his speech more rapid as he spoke, a clear sign to his companion that the situation was grave. “Fendahl feed on every spectrum of life energy. In order to grow in power they need the captured energy of a group of beings of the same race. They use a being with a high psionic rating as a focal point and then subvert twelve others, ‘[‘his gestalt allows the Fendahl to increase in power. They have been feeding on each other for centuries and the race is dying out. But your being here could change all that. Is this all that remains of the staff?”

“There was a total of twenty in the station, including us in the room,” Hawkins said.

The Doctor looked about. “Six guards here and the two of you. That means that there are twelve people out there. There is a Fendahl core and probably eleven Fendahleen. They will need one more. We’ve got to get out of here.”

“There’s no place to go,” Hawkins said.

“My TARDIS. It’s just outside the dome. If we can just make it to the entrance without running into any Fendahleen.”

“That’s a big if, Doctor,” Gerrold said. “If they are as powerful as you say they are and they outnumber us…”

“They are, Mister Gerrold,” the Doctor confirmed. “They also have the potential to attack your mind, by projecting themselves mentally. But it’s

the only hope we have. I don't suppose anybody has any salt here?"

"Salt?" Marina asked. "In the mess hall, but not here. Why?"

"It affects the Fendahl, disrupts their psychic link. It can even kill them if you use sufficient quantity."

"So what do we do?" Gerrold asked.

The Doctor stepped up to the entrance to the guard station. "Throw open the door and run for it."

"That's it?" Vance asked incredulously. "That's a plan?!?"

"We have no salt to defend us," the Doctor explained. "The only hope is that we can make it to the TARDIS. Once there, I can send out a message to my people and they can help us."

Bernice stepped up to the Doctor and whispered. "It's that serious?"

She saw the look in his eyes; a mix of sadness and inevitability. "What will be, must be," he replied cryptically. Aloud, he said, "Shall we go?"

Gerrold stepped up to the Doctor. "All right. If it's just going to be a simple run for the door, we'll do it by the numbers. I'm going to throw open the door and step out with you, Peters, right behind me," he said pointing to a tall, thin guard. "Once we give the all clear, the Doctor and Ms. Summerfield will follow with Doctors Franz and Hawkins. The rest of you thugs will cover the rear. Right?"

They all nodded their understanding.

"Right then. Let's go."

Gerrold reached for the door and pulled it open. He dashed out, his weapon at the ready. Peters followed. The security chief scanned the corridor and gave the signal to the Doctor and the others. They emptied out of the guard station and quickly ran down the hallway.

"What do you mean, what will be, will be?" Bernice asked. "What are you playing at?"

"Not now, Bernice," the Doctor hissed. She could see he was not happy with the situation, but there was something else to his demeanour.

"Stop!" Gerrold ordered. He pointed at a small, snake-like being writhing around the comer of the corridor. It let out a low hiss through a large mouth in the front of its tubular shape. "Fendahleen!" the Doctor snapped, turning his face away, his hand to his eyes. "Cover your eyes! Do not look at them! Mister Gerrold, is there another way?"

The security chief pointed to the left, in what seemed to be further into the complex. "There!" They changed direction and ran.

“Where are you going?” Hawkins asked. “This is going to bring us to the main lab!”

“If we can ditch the little buggers,” Gerrold said, “we can backtrack to the entrance.”

“You hope,” Bernice muttered.

They ran further into the complex, with Gerrold in the lead. The Doctor noted how the hallways all looked the same. It made him a little uneasy thinking that Gerrold may not know where they were going.

Gerrold quickly dashed the Doctor’s fears as he opened two twin doors in confidence. The security chief gasped at the sight before him.

From the Doctor’s viewpoint, he could see a number of small specimen containers about the room. They were all empty and devoid of power. In the centre stood a tall woman with golden skin. Her hair appeared to be alive. Snaking strands hissed as though she were the legendary Medusa. Her face was a gold tone, her eyes, wide and devoid of pupils. Next to her were two Fendahleen.

“Your eyes!” the Doctor warned. “Cover them!

“I didn’t!” Gerrold cried. “I can’t move! Doctor! I can’t move!”

The Fendahleen moved forward towards the security chief. “Quickly!” the Doctor ordered. “Run!”

“Doctor!” Gerrold screamed in panic.

“What will we do?” Peters asked.

“You’ve got to run,” the Doctor urged Gerrold. He placed a hand on Gerrold’s shoulder, careful to keep his other hand over his eyes. He squeezed the shoulder hard as though willing the man to snap out of his paralysis. “You’ve got to overcome it! We can’t help you! If you don’t, you’ll become a Fendahleen!”

“I can’t! I can’t move my legs! It’s going to make me into one of them!” With great effort, Gerrold reached for his weapon and placed it at his temple.

Bernice and Marina let out a scream as the bolt from Gerrold’s weapon ended his torment.

“Go! Go!” the Doctor yelled. “Don’t look back!” They ran from the room, the Fendahleen in pursuit.

They poured out of the complex into the midday sun, squinting at the change in illumination. The Doctor was the last out, gesturing the others

towards the TARDIS.

"Quickly! Into the TARDIS!"

Hawkins looked towards the police telephone box. "Surely we're not all getting into that?"

"Now!" the Doctor roared.

They didn't need any further coaxing. The Fendahleen were emerging from the complex. They dashed across the desolate landscape to the time craft.

The Doctor locked the doors to the TARDIS behind him and stepped up to the console. He placed his hands on two small silver plates situated in a comer of the control panel. He closed his eyes, his mouth twisting in a mix of anger, fear and frustration.

"Doctor?" Bernice asked.

"Not now," he said through gritted teeth. "Must make sure they understand the situation." Forgetting for a moment their predicament, Hawkins and Marina walked about the control room lost in amazement.

"This is incredible," Hawkins said. "It's bigger on the inside than on the outside. Some sort of dimensional transference, I assume."

Bernice stepped up to him and took his arm, guiding him away from his studies of the craft. He caught the look in her eyes. "It's not what you think."

"And what do I think?" Bernice asked, knowing full well the answer.

"I respect her as a fellow colleague," Hawkins said with all the sincenty he could muster.

"Like you 'respected' me… until you seduced me," she said with some mockery in her tone. "Until it turned out you weren't a fellow colleague," he said with an acid that surprised even him

Bernice took a step back. "That's a cheap shot."

Hawkins' face softened. "I'm sorry. Old wounds. Your lack of proper credentials made me look like a fool."

"I know. And I'm sorry about that. But I did contribute to the expedition."

"And almost got my findings thrown out," he added. He took her hand. "Bernice, I'm sorry it didn't work out between us. But I'm being totally honest with you when I say that Marina Franz means nothing to me other than a fellow scientist." A guilty grin crossed his lips. "Besides, I brought someone else along for what you're thinking.

“A young blonde, no doubt,” Bernice joked.

“You always did know me too well, my dear,” Hawkins said with a sigh.

The Doctor stepped away from the console and brushed a bead of sweat front his forehead. “There. That should do it.” He started to set the co-ordinates into the console. “Now to get out of here.”

Bernice looked surprised. “That’s it? Nothing more to do?”

“No, the Time Lords will handle the rest. I want to get out of here before they arrive.”

“But what if they don’t? What if the Fendahl manages to escape? What if this is the way things are supposed to be? That’s what you said inside, wasn’t it? What will be, will be.”

“Not now, Bernice, the Doctor snapped. “Professor Hawkins, if you wouldn’t mind, I need the exact time and location you came from. I should be able to have you home for tea.” The Doctor walked around the console, tapping instructions into the flight computer.

Bernice saw he was going to continue to ignore her. She turned and exited the room. Hawkins stepped up to the Doctor. “It is going to be all right, isn’t it?”

The Doctor looked up at him. “The Fendahl core has not been completed. They will be contained by my people.”

Bernice entered the console room. She was carrying a large sack that rattled with glass. In her other hand, she held a slingshot. She stepped up to the console and activated the door. The Doctor looked up from his work at the sound of the entrance parting.

“What are you doing?”

Bernice turned to face him. “We’ve spoken many times about the principles of non-interference in time, but this is something different. This was our fault, humanity. If Vance and his people hadn’t been here, they wouldn’t have given the Fendahl the power to rise up and escape this world. It wouldn’t have caused the damage they did to the Martians. It wouldn’t have travelled to Earth. It must be stopped. We owe it to the future.”

“Bernice, I know this is hard for you, but the Time Lords will handle this. Shut the door,” the Doctor argued.

“Not good enough, Doctor.” Bernice said. “After all we’ve been through you’ll understand if I say I don’t believe you.” She ran past the guards and out the door.

“Bernice!”

“I’ll get her. Doctor!” Hawkins ran after her.

“No! Wait!” the Doctor urged, but stopped. Hawkins was already gone. He reached over and shut the door.

“What are you doing?” Marina asked surprised. “Open the door. We’ve got to help them.”

“What will be, must be,” the Doctor said softly.

Bernice stopped short at the sight of the gathered Fendahleen. She closed her eyes and quickly loaded a salt shaker from her sack into the slingshot. She let a wild shot fly over the Fendahleen that crashed against the side of the dome. “Damn!” she said. “This isn’t going to be easy!” Hawkins ran up beside her and grabbed her arm. “Benny, we have to go!”

“Vance! Get back!”

“There’s nothing you can do, Bernice. Besides, you’re a terrible shot!”

Bernice couldn’t help but laugh. Even with everything happening, Vance could still find some humour in any situation. “But Vance, the Martians! The Fendahl will have…”

“I know,” he said. “I remember how we used to stay up late so many nights and talk about the people of Mars. I know how passionate you are about them, but this will only get you killed. We have to trust the Doctor and his people.”

“You don’t know the Doctor as well as I do,” Bernice replied. “This isn’t as simple as it seems.”

“No,” Vance agreed, “but this isn’t the answer.

Hey!”

Vance let out a gasp.

“What is it?” Bernice said, fearful to open her eyes.

“A Fendahleen. It brushed up against my foot. I looked down at it and now I’m trapped. I can’t move!”

“Where is it?” she asked. Bernice started to hurl salt shaker after salt shaker around her feet.

“It’s no use, Bernice. You’re not even close. I said you were a terrible shot. Get out of here!”

“But you,” she argued.

“I’m finished,” he said. “Hurry now. Before the Doctor leaves you.”

She turned to run and felt a hand reach out to her.

“Wait!” Bernice almost opened her eyes as she felt Hawkins lips brush her cheek in a soft kiss. “I missed doing that. Now go!”

Bernice ran back in the direction she came. She fought the urge to open her eyes just as she reached the TARDIS, finding the door locked. She threw herself against the entrance and started pounding.

“Doctor! Open the door!”

She resisted the urge to look behind her, fearful that the Fendahleen were closing in on her. She could hear Hawkins’ screams fading as she imagined the transformation.

Suddenly, the door gave and Bernice tumbled inside. The door slammed shut, followed by a low grinding sound as the TARDIS faded away.

“Welcome aboard,” the Doctor said.

Bernice rose to her feet, a snarl on her lips. “They got Vance. The Fendahl core is complete You’d better hope the Time Lords are able to stop it ”

“And you had better hope,” the Doctor said softly. “The Fendahl was not at full power. It needed another Fendahleen to make the gestalt complete. You made that possible with Vance.”

Bernice’s face fell “Mars?”

The Doctor shrugged. “What will be, must be.”

“You knew this would happen,” she said, her hands balling up into fists in anger.

“I knew the outcome I didn’t know the details You and I were meant to be here. If you hadn’t gone outside, history would have changed. That’s why I wanted to get away from here as quickly as possible. The Time Lords would have had my head for what we did! “

“We were meant to be here because history says so or the Time Lords?” Bernice asked.

“Who knows?” the Doctor replied cryptically. “And that’s it then?” Bernice asked.

“I’m afraid so,” the Doctor said softly “I’m sorry ”

“Not good enough,” Bernice said. She stormed out of the room.

“No,” the Doctor whispered. “It isn’t.”

JUPITER

FOR WANT OF A BETTER WORD by MARTIN DAY

The old man shivered and gripped the slender cane tightly There was a chill in the artificially maintained air, but in truth his reaction was not entirely involuntary. Rather, he was unaccustomed to surprise, to awe — to the revelation that sometimes the stuff of deep legend is more than mere fancy.

“The rolling sphere,” he said grandly, as if expecting someone to have followed him out of the blue craft. “Extraordinary. And in this solar system, of all places. Under the ice of Europa… Where life predates that of Earth.” He turned, a rare excitement blazing across his pale features. “Extraordinary!”

But there was no one there, no one appreciate the view as the sphere forded great knots of bubbling water and incandescent shoals of plankton.

The ice of Europa’s surface, which encapsulated the ocean like the skin of a bloated fruit, was impossibly distant The water seemed to stretch to infinity, as dark as space and as sonorous as the deepest cavern. The globe emitted a little fight as it travelled, startling shark-like jellyfish as they torpedoed through the inky depths.

The only other light in the ocean, as the globe arced on its never ending journey, came from many-legged creatures that dangled glowing orbs like angler fish, hoping to tempt the unwary into their enormously-gaping mandibles. They scattered in a flash of organic pixels as the sphere rolled towards them

The sphere supplied its own gravity, which remained constant, despite the spinning vistas beyond its temporal confines The man surmised the

construction to be about the size of a small town, and if it had any mechanical or metaphorical heart, he had yet to find it. He felt like an ant, trapped inside a marble in a giant's hand, doomed for eternity to make no meaningful progress. "Eternity in an hour," the man muttered, as he struggled to remove a great golden pocket watch from the shadows of his coat. An hour? Two, perhaps, if time had any meaning in this place.

How typical of his people! The landscape was a mixture of the outrageous and the mundane, the ephemeral and the impossible. The walls — which faded whenever he approached, and clustered at the periphery of his vision — were ribbons of memories and potential, each image, each sensation encountered, being more outlandish, more beguiling, than the last. Autumn came and went in a minute, leaving faint impressions of rotting brown leaves under his feet. An imagined sun crept into the absent sky, taking a full week to emerge, sending streamers of red in all directions and times. It set again in the blink of an eye.

The man sighed. He should return to his ship, to what had become familiar and comforting. And safe.

Too safe, perhaps. A melancholic heaviness settled on his shoulders. He'd been running for too long, and he was tired of it. Tired, and frightened.

"Frightened?" came a voice at his back. "In this garden of delights? This art gallery of the mind?" The man turned in shock, clutching his chest. He looked the newcomer up and down as he recovered his wits. "Good morning, sir," he said with gruff politeness.

The arrival was a misshapen, lumpen thing, all sinew and muscle and perfunctory limbs. It had been constructed, or grown, or birthed, by a society with an atrophied sense of aesthetics.

The old man smiled. "And you are?"

"I am…" The creature paused, its paradoxically whispered words hinging in the air like the aroma of warm bread. 'I am that which I am. I am this place, and it is me. And we are more besides."

"You are a poor poet, sir," said the man, more harshly than he'd have liked. "But your world contains poetry enough."

"And you are a poor traveller," said the creature with barely a hint of rebuke. "Rootless, impatient. You no sooner arrive than you desire to move on again."

"Then why have I elected to stay here for so long, hmm?"

The creature nodded its blank face. “Why indeed?”

They walked for some time, the old man flicking his cane upwards crisply with every step. The inchoate humanoid became mute, weighing the other’s words. Weighing them, and formulating a verdict.

“I thought this place legendary,” said the old man, “And yet I find myself here. A staging-post for your observation of the humans, I suppose?”

No answer.

“Hmm. No matter. I will have answers soon enough. I can feel my body running out of energy, a spring in a neglected clock. Like — what was the fellow’s name? — like Holst I hear the ticking of fate, of destiny, always in my ears. Inexorable, hmm? Inexorable.”

The white-haired man turned sharply, but the creature was wise to his capricious ways. He trailed just behind, although it barely mattered if he let the traveller evade him. The land and the king were one.

“I admit… I do not welcome the approaching renewal. It seems to me, in life, that there is a balance. I — we — are so very unlike the Mayfly creatures I choose to spend my time with. But the corollary of such a birthright, such privilege… I have heard rumours.”

‘Rumours?” questioned the creature.

“Rumours of the internalised pain, the agony, the torment. The risk. No one will speak about it, of course. But the pain of renewal, of rebirth. The literature speaks of a purging by fire and ice.”

The guardian of the sphere stopped suddenly, nodding. “I understand now why you came here,” it said. “TARDIS is always attuned to such thoughts, such feelings.”

“But I never believed this place to exist!” exclaimed the old man.

“The wishing well of our peoples? A fountain of youth? Wisely it is said that if such things did not exist, the gods themselves would have to invent them for us.”

“Gods?”

The creature walked away without answering, the sphere darkening in eternal eclipse, reflecting the old man’s mood. “But there is more,” said the creature, its head nodding imperceptibly. “More that you are not telling me.”

“Indeed,” said the man. “Indeed. The apocryphal writing, the verses that verge on agnostic apostasy, tell of a darker secret. That the most blessed

beings have only the most despised of deaths to look forward to. That the order of the universe is preserved by the agony of this cessation."

"You make death sound… barbaric."

"I am haunted by the thought that it might be," said the man.

"Surprising that you should already fear something so far from you," said the creature. "Your body is frail, but you will have others."

"Perhaps…" The man paused, deep in thought. "Perhaps it is the creaking of these old bones that reminds me of my fate."

"Even so," said the creature, "You know such matters are beyond me. The legends that you have spent a life-time feigning ignorance of must have told you that."

"Of course," agreed the old man. "If I'd wanted mere insight, I would have gone elsewhere!"

"Then what do you want?"

"A wish," said the man. He dug into his pocket, found what looked like a burnished florin.

"You cannot buy what I offer," said the guardian. "The garments of your good deeds are but filthy rags to me."

The old man leant over a well that had appeared in the fleeting landscape of the sphere's interior, and dropped the coin into it. He watched the circle turn and dwindle and finally blink out of sight in the darkness and the shadows. Then he turned back to the creature, his angular features set and hard.

"But I can beg. I can plead for mercy."

The creature nodded. The sphere was becoming brighter all the time, almost glowing with the power of the old man's beliefs. It seemed to take the guardian by surprise. It inclined its head to one side, interested for perhaps the first time. "What is it that you want?"

The man sighed deeply as the sphere burnt with passion and life and hope and truth. "I want to die as a human," he said.

SATURN

SATURNALIA by LANCE PARKIN

Breakfast at Tiffany's, followed by a walk through the Butterfly Gardens of forty sixth century Amazon City, and lunch Venusian Nightfish and Moontruffles — in the food hall of the Lunar Tower.

The afternoon was spent with Oscar Wilde, always an excellent host, and on good fonn. They ate dinner as a guest of the Emperor Augustus, before an evening of drunken dancing at the Cavern Club, with the Beatles topping the bill, of course.

As they half-dozed in the taxi as it headed back to the TARDIS, the Doctor and his companion Iphigenia debated where they would see dawn Every day could be like this, and every day — barring accidents —it was. The TARDIS was a connoisseur's delight. The ship's wine cellars were full of the finest vintages, the library had every major first edition, and several works unavail able to all but the authors" closest friends The Doctor and Iffy, as she liked to be known, travelled to only the most beautiful places, and talked to only the most interesting people. The Doctor had told Iffy once that he'd spent the majority of his early life in quarries and corridors and prison cells, but she didn't believe him He assured her that some of his other incarnations were far more puritanical than he, but that only made her giggle.

"Don't you want to sleep?" he asked her, but that only made her giggle some more

Iffy pressed him, asked him to nominate the most beautiful dawn in the universe.

The Doctor could think of several just off the top of his head — there was no shortage of stars in the universe, after all. Beauty, as the Doctor often said, was very much in the eye of the beholder. The leisurely rising of Betelgeuse, swollen and red, over a landscape of scoured marble; the "glancing stars" of Pallamak, the eighteen sunlets that darted around the sky, confusing generation after generation of Pallamakki astronomers; the so called "black sun" of a world in permanent eclipse, or a white sun coming up over the Sea of Liquid Diamond of Eastern Marinus.

But he had to make a choice, so he cheated. They arrived back at the TARDIS — which, for once, looked perfectly at home — paid the cabby, and went inside.

Telling Iphigenia to catch up with her sleep, he busied himself at the octagonal console, programming in a course. Iphigenia tried peeking over his shoulder, but he ushered her away. She asked him for a clue — would she need to change out of her groovy sixties gear? He assured her she would. Into what: a swimming costume? jeans? a spacesuit? Jodhpurs? Animal skins? The Doctor chuckled, but didn't answer. Iphigenia went to her room, and slept soundly, as she always did. When she awoke, however much later, she found a ballgown over the back of one of her chairs. Her size, of course, laid out for her by the Doctor.

It was soft to the touch, like felt, looked more like some sort of leather, but was almost certainly a type of plastic. It was holochromatic: the colour shifting gently, like a deep ocean. As she started to put it on, the gown helped her, slipping itself around her limbs, fitting itself to her. It left her back bare, but supported her front somehow, so she didn't mind. It had a halter neck and went down to her ankles, without restricting her legs. There was a dimensionally transcendental zero pocket at the hip, invisible from outside.

She looked at herself in the full-length mirror. It suited the larger lady, unlike some galactic fashions (she'd lost count of the planets where the women wore miniskirts and unflattering vinyl jumpsuits). It was futuristic, obviously, and must have originated at a point quite some way into the future.

The Doctor gave a discreet cough.

"Almost there," he said. "You look delightful," he added, almost as an afterthought.

"Where?'

“Titan,” the Doctor announced, as they stepped out of the TARDIS and onto the observation deck.

Snowflelds over a ink-black sky full of small moons and shooting stars. The observation deck was a vast bubble, unsullied by girders or struts or pylons, indeed anything that seemed to support the thing.

“We’re on an ocean liner?”

The Doctor had paced over to the glass — or whatever — and was staring out and up. “Not quite. It’s an iceliner — it runs on antigravity skis. This is the Saturnalia, the largest pleasure ship ever built by the human race.”

“Good evening. Doctor, Miss … “

“Birmingham,” she replied.

“A beautiful name.” He took her hand and kissed it gently.

He was around six four and wore a garment which was something between a kimono, a toga and a cloak. It seemed to be made of the same stuff as her gown, but was lighter — whites and platinums instead of greens and blues. He was square-jawed, dark-haired, muscular.

Behind him were some other fine specimens — men and women, in the same shifting patterns. She glanced back at the Doctor, in his dark pinstriped suit and pressed silk shirt and thought how odd he looked here, in the most ordinary of twenty-first century clothes.

“A drink?” one of the women offered. Her hair was grey, but not like an old woman’s — a lustrous, healthy grey. The woman was everything Iffy usually hated: tall, long-legged, athletic. A few years ago, had this woman come into the same bar or club as Iffy, Iffy would have just got up and left — what would be the point of trying to pull when a woman like would have all the men dancing round her like iron filings? But she was less insecure these days, and she was gratified to be getting a fair few appreciative glances.

“I don’t wish to be indiscreet. Doctor,” a tall, bald, man began, “we are honoured by your presence, but it is the custom to bring something of value to a gathering such as this.”

“A bring a bottle do?” Iffy said. “I’m sure we could find something in the TARDIS.”

The Doctor smiled. “I assure you my dear that these people have a finer cellar than even we do.”

Iffy could believe it.

“I hear there’s a bottle in there that would suffice,” one of the young women said. “Not a wine bottle — although there is wine in there, and vineyards and whole worlds.”

The Doctor chuckled. “Not for sale. In fact I’m not sure I know where it is. Not seen it for ages. It’s probably corked by now. I brought this instead.”

He held out a magazine with a red and yellow cover in a fussy little plastic bag that kept it rigid.

“A copy of Detective Comics #27,” one of the women announced.

“The first appearance of Batman. A misprint copy — look, different logo. Mint.”

“Valuable,” one of the men sniffed, “but not that valuable.”

“One could buy a planet with it,” another man said, looking down at the Doctor, “but not a planet one would ever want to visit.”

“It’s signed by Oscar Wilde, the Beatles and the Emperors Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula and Claudius,” the Doctor noted, handing it over. “That puts the value up a little, I’m sure you’ll agree.”

There was polite laughter and applause. The beautiful people passed around the comic, taking turns to give an appreciative laugh.

Iffy took the Doctor aside. “What’s going on?”

“I’ve just paid for the privilege of being here. This is one of the most expensive nights out in the universe. These are among the wealthiest humans that ever lived.”

“And they are human?” Iffy wasn’t sure — they were so tall, so healthy.

“Genetically modified, I think the term was in your day. Highly evolved, highly advanced.”

“Peaceful?”

“Doesn’t it seem peaceful?” the Doctor asked, pointedly not answering the question.

Something nagged at Iffy’s brain as the Doctor drifted over to mingle. From what she had gathered, the Doctor had left his own world, all those years ago, to get away from this sort of elite. Even in a utopia of iceliners, perfect teeth and backless dresses that looked good on fat people. Iffy knew that wealth was relative — these people could have their rich people parties, but only at the expense of someone else.

“So to what do we owe the company of your pleasure?” a young woman asked. She looked at Iffy as though she were a monkey.

“We’ve come to see a beautiful dawn,” Iffy replied, refusing to be pressured.

There was appreciative laughter.

“What makes a dawn beautiful, Iphigenia?” the Doctor asked gently.

Iffy thought about it. “The most beautiful dawn I’ve ever seen? On the Atlantic, watching the fog disperse, finally feeling some warmth on my face. Bodies in the sea all round, frozen solid.”

“Sounds ghastly,” a tall man suggested.

“It was. But I knew I was alive, I knew the Doctor was alive. I saw the light, and I knew we’d made it. We’d been on the Titanic, you see.”

“An unsinkable ocean liner,” the Doctor explained, staring out over the ice fields. “It … hit ice. We were late for dinner, and so I didn’t check the co-ordinates properly as I left the TARDIS. But Iffy is right — when you know you are going to die, when night falls, and you’re surrounded by the darkness, when you didn’t think you’d ever see another dawn, then when that dawn comes it is the most beautiful thing there is.”

“What a lovely story,” the youngest looking woman said, clapping her hands together. “Tell us another story. Doctor.”

The Doctor gave a thin smile and began.

“Once upon a time, there lived a race of princesses and princes. They all had a castle each, they all had horses and carriages and jewels and gold. They ate the finest foods, they were the most beautiful people that ever lived.” The Doctor’s face fell. “But that meant nothing. It meant worse than nothing. All it meant was that they wanted larger palaces, more horses, bigger carriages, more jewels, more gold. The finest food was no longer enough — they wanted finer still. Their standards of beauty became ever more exacting, ever more impossible to obtain.”

“They sound terrible,” one of the men said.

“Yes, frightful,” another agreed.

“They stripped their land of all wealth, hoarding it. They travelled, taking all they could find They learnt new ways to build castles, new types of gemstone, even discovered new types of gold and new types of horses. They though themselves to be the greatest people that ever lived, but they were all secretly unhappy. All the jewels, all the horses, food finer than the fines food there is couldn’t satisfy their palates. They had come to expect perfection, from everything always. And for perfection to reign, there could

be no imperfection. They hide themselves away from it, content to let their subjects enslave one another. And it couldn't last, and it didn't.

"One night, it all ended. The subjects had enough. They could never live in castles, they had never so much as seen a horse or a gemstone."

"Good gracious," one of the men said "Whatever did they do?"

"They waited until all the beautiful people were having a party and dropped a fusion bomb or them. It missed, as it happened, but that's not a big problem with fusion bombs. The beautiful empty, people sank without trace into the deepest, coldest ocean. But as they looked up at the receding sky, they saw their last dawn, and they appreciated it for the first time. They realised what was truly beautiful, they saw it all, they saw its value."

The Doctor made a little bow. The men and women looked at each other for a few moments then gave a polite round of applause.

"I'm not convinced by the ending," one said.

The Doctor smiled. "Oh, I'm sure you will in the morning. Come on. Iffy — time to get going.'

The Doctor and Iffy returned to the TARDIS, to go on with their travels.

As the TARDIS faded away, there was a low rumbling noise.

The beautiful people frowned as one — whatever was that, spoiling their perfect night?

URANUS

DUTY COOLS by JON DE BURGH MILLER

“So I was up against four of the bastards or was it five? I can’t remember. Anyway, they had me up against the wall and I thought I was toast, but then bang, right out of the blue the Doctor — the guy I was time travelling with — he came out of the blue and froze them with some fancy gadget he’d just cooked up We got out fine, but it was close ”

Karia nodded, clearly impressed and wiped the last traces of salsa from his stubble chin. He looked around the restaurant and surveyed the mismatched unfortunates who seemed to be propping up the places these days

“So this Doctor,” he asked. “Is he a local bloke.”

Ace’s face fell, and her eyes betrayed a hidden bitterness that told Karia that he really shouldn’t pursue this line of questioning any further.

“I don’t see him anymore,” she said, blankly “I’m my own person now ”

Karia took a deep breath and smiled.

‘Of course,” he said. “Now, Let’s get another round in. Pint?”

“Yeah.” said Ace, a slight cheeriness flashing back onto her face. “Cheers ”

Ace watched as Karia hauled his muscular form out of its seat and marched over to the bar He was a bit of a strange one, but his heart was in the right place.

Typical lower ranks military, she thought. Ruggedly good looking, and charming in a "want on a mission or in a bed but not on a regular basis" sort of way, but at the same time bloody annoying. It was his mannerisms that did it. The way he would look straight through you as you were talking to him. What you said didn't matter, it was that it was you saying it that was important. Both infuriating and endearing. She could certainty think of a lot worse people to spend a two month deep space voyage with.

She checked her wrist computer for a status update.

The Dalek battle cruiser was still on it's way to Uranus. (It was presumed that they were interested in rare metals mined on the planet. With a one-joke planet like Uranus there wasn't anything else they could be after.) This meant that if the Generals decided to go ahead with the mission, the Burning Eagles would have to intercept the ship in about three hours, just as it passed through the dust cloud that marked the very outer edge of the solar system. Three hours in which to prepare for what was possibly the most dangerous mission of her life. Three hours before she was forced to prove to the rest of the Bunting Eagles that she had been selected to join them for this tour of duty because she was the best. Not just because she had been lucky enough to have been previously assigned to a kamikaze squadron who had decided that getting themselves all killed to protect her was a good thing.

She wondered if the Burning Eagles would do the same. Sure, they had the reputation of being the finest guerrillas in Space Corps, but there were enough horror stories going around about what the Daleks were currently up to that even the hardest nuts seemed on the edge of cracking.

Ace's computer beeped, and she glanced down to check it again. Incoming mail.

"Activate," she sighed.

As she read the message, Karia arrived with a couple of drinks.

"Thanks," she said, taking the drink and downing it in one. "Finish it quick, there's been some news. The mission's definitely on. We've got to get down to the cargo bay. We leave in thirty minutes.

"Ah well, all in a days work," sighed Karia, before downing his pint.

The hull of the transport ship shook violently as the craft passed into slipspace. Heavy harnesses strapping them tightly to the walls of the sparse

crate, the platoon of soldiers boisterously sang songs of war to get them in the mood for battle.

‘Ace had struggled to try a couple of verses, but at the end of the day that sort of thing wasn’t quite her. She wasn’t here for the machismo of the whole situation, she was here because it was the best way she could think of to make a difference. Trapped several centuries from the time she once would have called her own lime, not really belonging anywhere in time and space, the best she could do was to fight the greatest evils she could, and they didn’t get much more evil than the Daleks. Most of all, though, she just needed time. Time to figure out what it all meant. Time to do something completely different. Something she could put all her heart and all her energies into, which wouldn’t leave her as a self-pitying wreck. So far, the Space Corps appeared to be doing the job quite adequately.

“Come on!” shouted Karia, a big grin crossing his face as he punched Ace in the arm. “Aren’t you going to join in?”

“No thanks,” she said, smiling back at him. “I prefer to prepare in my own way.”

Ace’s train of thought was shattered as the ship lurched to one side. A klaxon started blaring out indicating that the pilot crew had switched to full alert. The singing and revelry instantly stopped, as the troopers waited anxiously to see what was going on outside their claustrophobic transport tube.

Ace looked across to where the mission leader. Captain McDermott, was reaching down to his waist to activate the PA channel. He mumbled something into his wrist computer, then looked up gravely at the rest of the troops.

“Bad news, kids,” sighed McDermott, his gruff voice carrying the weight of a thousand deaths. “The Daleks have changed course. A cluster of Dart Fighters has been dispatched to off us. Control’s trying to outmanoeuvre them, but it’s looking like our element of surprise has been compromised. We’re still going to go in, but we know that the ‘Leks will be waiting for us.”

“What?” shouted one of the newer recruits. “They’ll kill us. We’ll all be killed!”

McDermott unclipped his harness, threw himself over to the comer of the crate where the recruit was and grabbed him by the collar of his jacket. “Never talk to me like that again, you here me!” he screamed.

The recruit nodded fearfully, and McDermott turned round to look at the rest of the troops.

"Now," he said, "unbuckle and load up!" He glanced down at his computer. "Six minutes and we attack the mothership. We'll he boarding in pairs, so choose your raiding partner quickly."

"Ready?" said Ace, glancing over at Karia. Her friend unstrapped himself, took a deep breath and reached down for his energy weapon. "As I'll ever be," he said, reaching down a hand to help Ace up. "And God help us if we're not."

The infiltration pod landed with a thud on the inside of the Dalck mothership's hull. The pod whirred as drones attached to it worked frantically to reseal its entry hole, preventing the structural integrity of the ship from being weakened. Once it was safe to emerge, a red light rippled across the pod and the front of it flipped open. With long perfected timing, Ace and Karia ran out of the pod, their guns facing forward. Ace pressed a button on her wrist computer to let the others know that they were safely in, then looked ahead for something she might recognise from the simulation. At the end of the corridor was a crossroads, and Ace and Karia ducked into a corner in order that they wouldn't be seen.

A patrol of Daleks glided silently by, and Ace felt chilled as she saw that their guns seemed to be smoking. She hoped that they hadn't already got to one of the other raiding parties. She desperately wanted to ran out and start slicing the metal bastards up, but sanity prevented her from doing so. She had to stick to the mission. She had to knock out the navigation deck. After the Dalek patrol was safely out of view, Ace ran across the corridor and motioned for Karia to join her. She glanced down and sure enough, as had been promised, etched into the middle of the floor was a hatch that should lead down to the navigation deck. Ace checked the holographic blueprint currently being displayed by her wrist computer to make sure they really were in the right place, and when she was confident that they were, reached down and dug her nails into the grooves that lined the edge of the hatch. Obviously designed for Dalek manipulation arms rather than human hands, the hatch refused to budge.

"Give us a hand here, can you?" she whispered to Karia. The man nodded, rubbed his palms together, and reached down to help Ace with the hatch. As he did so, he suddenly froze. His face whitened.

“What?” asked Ace. “What’s wrong?”

Karia lifted an arm and pointed to the wall behind them.

Ace looked up and suddenly all hope of success seemed to disappear. The wall was moving, rippling like jelly. In the middle of the wall, the shape of four Daleks seemed to be appearing. It was as if they had developed the ability to walk through walls. Ace wondered whether these were holograms, but as the first one broke out of the wall to fully emerge into the daylight, it fired a burst of energy that shattered a girder above Ace’s head.

“Get down!” yelled Karia, as he started firing back at the Daleks. He moved slowly down the corridor as the Daleks emerged from the walls, firing madly at them, diverting their attention away from Ace.

“Ace! Go!” she heard him scream.

She ducked into the shadows and began once more to struggle with the hatch. Every couple of seconds she looked up to make sure that none of the Daleks had seen her, but they all seemed to be chasing after Karia. Eventually the hatch slid open and she lifted her body into the gap it revealed and began to work her way down the inside of the maintenance tube that lay under the hatch. Although slightly bigger than Ace, the tube was still wide enough that she could get a foothold into die edges to stop herself falling.

After almost a minute, she reached a flat surface under which she knew lay the room she was trying to get to. She cursed the fact that Daleks didn’t need to breathe, as she knew that on a human ship the ground would be covered with a ventilation shaft.

She reached into her jacket and pulled out a cutter gun. She flipped down her shades to protect her eyes and fired the gun at the floor. Sparks flew everywhere as she slowly cut through the thick hot metal.

Soon she was through. After a quick look to check the coast was clear, Ace jumped through the hole and found herself in the middle of a room lined with computer monitors and panels obviously designed to be controlled only by Daleks.

The lighting in the room was a murky green, and even once she had flipped her shades back up, Ace still found she had to strain her eyes to make out all die detail in the place.

At first she had been sure she was alone in the room, but when a high-pitched screeching noise began, she knew she had been spotted.

“Shit,” she said, as she looked around for the source of the noise.

There, in the comer of the room, was a small type of Dalek that made Ace think more of R2-D2 than Davros. This had to be the navigator.

Ace reached down for her blaster, lifted it, and checked the indicator to make sure it was at full power.

"WAIT" shrieked the Dalek, before Ace could fire.

Wait? What kind of a Dalek used words like wait?

"IF-YOU-DESTROY-THIS-UNIT-ALL-BIOLOGICAL-UNITS-ABOARD-THIS-VESSEL-WILL-DIE!"

"Only you Dalek bastards," grinned Ace.

"NO", shouted the Dalek, in the way that Daleks do.

"THIS-UNIT-IS-A-TRAP. DESTROY-ME-AND-YOU-DESTROY-ALL."

Could it be true? Had they fallen for Dalek cunning once more? Was this all an elaborate trap designed to get rid of the Burning Eagles in one go?

"You're… you're not like the others, are you?" said Ace.

"HUMAN-SYNAPTIC-SIMULACRA. A-BATTLE-COMPUTER-WITH-NO-BIOLOGICAL-COMPONENT."

Ace shook her head. There really was no end to the tricks up the Dalek's sleeves.

If this was a trap, then she had to get out. If only there was a way to get the troops out alive and still destroy the navigator Dalek.

She took another look at the creature, and noticed that it was rooted by thick cables into the ground. She reached into one of her pockets and took out a small tablet of explosive. She plugged the material into her wrist computer, setting the detonation time for ten minutes, then slowly, without taking her eyes off the Dalek, placed the explosive on one of the panels at a height that she knew the navigator would be unable to reach.

"Thank you," she said to the Dalek, before turning and running out of the room.

Guns blazing, it had barely taken her three minutes to get back up to the floor where the boarding pods lay. She must have killed about twenty Daleks on the way up, but miraculously she seemed to have survived the experience with barely a scratch. As she neared the pods she was pleased to see a large group of hoops all gathered in a circle, backs facing each other, firing again and again at oncoming Dalek warriors.

Ace launched herself into the battle, and began screaming at her colleagues to move out of the way. "It's a trap," she told them. "The Daleks

set a trap for us. This whole place is going to go up any minute. Come on!"

She saw the shocked expressions on the faces of her fellow soldiers, and for no logical reason, felt guilty for being the one who broke the news to them. Gradually, the troops began to move back, desperately trying to avoid the Daleks' fire.

Ace leapt into the middle of the pack and sidled up to Karia, who despite the intense pressure and horror of the situation, was pleased enough to see her to smile. A heavy weight hit Ace and she almost lost her balance. One of the troops, a quiet lad who had only joined up several weeks before, had fallen into her, a smoking hole in die centre of his chest. He was dead. She had little choice but to let his body fall to the ground. She had to keep firing. She had to kill as many Daleks as possible, and save as many of her friends as she could.

It took almost five minutes to hold off the Dalek attack, but eventually the small band of troops who had survived managed to get to the boarding pods. Ace staggered into one, and looked around for Karia. Her friend jumped towards the pod, and as he did so Ace noticed that his expression was twisted and determined, as if the devil himself was making him fight. He fell forward, into Ace's arms. "Go!" he screamed at her, hauling himself into his seat and strapping himself in. "Come on!"

Ace took one last look out of the pod at the burning, ruined corridor, and hoped that the other troops would be able to get out safely too. She slammed her fist onto the launch button, and was thrown back into her seat as the boarding pod released an intense burst of air and fire that shot it out of the ship's hull like a bullet.

In a couple of minutes they were safely clear of the Dalek ship and the boarding pod's thrusters began to kick in, to take them back to the Space Corps training camp. Ace watched through the bubble-like shield on the front of the pod and saw the Dalek mothership silently and beautifully explode into a million pieces. She wondered whether it was all her doing — certainly the explosive she had used shouldn't have been that powerful — or whether she had just managed to hit some fuel lines or something.

She took several long breaths, wiped the sweat and blood from her forehead, and looked over at Karia. "We did it," she said. "We nailed the bastards."

Karia smiled, then closed his eyes.

It was then that Ace saw a sight far more terrifying than the Dalek army. A large, smouldering hole at Karia's waist was oozing blood and beneath it she could see the remains of his internal organs trying to cope with being scrambled by a Dalek weapon.

"Oh Karia," she cried. He must have been hit as they had run for the pods. The sheer determination he must have held to be able to hang on until the end, to ignore his injury until they were safely away from the ship, must have been incredible.

"Hold on Karia," she shouted at him. "Hang in there. There's surgeon's at the base, they'll sort you out." But as she said the words, she could read from the vacant look on her friends" eyes that they were in vain.

Ace looked around the restaurant and sighed. To most of the miscreants and dropouts here nothing had happened. It was just another day. But for her…

"Coffee?" said a voice. It was Captain McDermott. She nodded, and the captain placed a cup in front of her before sitting down.

"Will you be OK?" he asked.

Ace shrugged. "It's all part of war, isn't it? I mean, we know we're probably going to be killed. You'd have to be a right prat to think otherwise."

The Captain looked at her with an expression that told Ace he'd been here many times before.

"Just because we have to live with death on a daily basis, doesn't mean we have to be comfortable with it. We'd never be able to fight if we were."

"I know," said Ace, as she thought back to the battle on the mothership.

"I just keep thinking back. Keep wondering if maybe if I'd—"

"Don't," Captain McDermott ordered. "Don't ever ask yourself "what if?". It never helps."

Ace looked out of the window, out onto the spaceport, where yet another mission was preparing to launch. She wondered whether this really was the sort of life she wanted. Go out in space, kill some Daleks. It had all seemed so simple. So obvious. But now…

She stood up and moved out of her seat.

"I'm sorry," Ace said to McDermott. "I have to go now."

The captain turned and looked at her sympathetically. "Is there anything I can get you?" he asked. "Do you want to see a doctor?"

Ace paused, then shook her head slowly. “No, I definitely don’t. I don’t need to see anyone. I just need to be on my own for a bit.”

And as Ace left the restaurant, she realised that she was.

NEPTUNE

Being an extract from "THE AMAZING AVENTURES OF IRIS WILDTHYME ON NEPTUNE" by PAUL MAGRS

Another chapter begins with me opening my eyes. Funny that, isn't it?

But I often think that the spaces between chapters are like falling asleep. When I read I generally read in bed, and I try to read to the end of a chapter before giving in to sleep So, for me, the odd interstitial moments that wedge chapters apart are heavy, dreamy spaces. Every chapter in the world should begin with the opening of eyes.

And here I am doing just that, and drinking in an altogether new experience

I knew at once that I was standing on Neptune. And I didn't question it for a moment, nor thought for a second that I'd gone bananas.

It's difficult to explain My whereabouts was utterly obvious to me As if I had lived on the blue planet all my life and each particle of my being had been woven from this world's very substance. I knew I was on Neptune like you, beautiful reader, know that you are on the Earth.

I was lying down again, but this time I could move Although I had a touch of pins and needles. I was in the thick of a spongy bright blue growth of moss, at the bottom of a natural bowl in the ground. I could see low hills over the ridge of the bowl; they were a deep powder blue and the sky was a much more vivid purple than the dawn on Yorkshire I had left behind

The sun was intense and blasting my whole, spread naked body with light which, here, seemed rather hotter and more glaring than I was used to. It was rather like seeing a fairly unassuming friend unexpectedly in mutual company, and watching them behave much more effusively than you know them to be.

I sat up to examine some quite interesting rock formations around me. The deep blue rock appeared to be studded with a variety of precious jewels. They were fabulous, but quite impossible to prise out from their sockets. I gave it a good go, however, before giving up.

I was gagging for a drink, I realised. If I'd known I was coming out this far. I'd have stocked up properly with some sensible supplies. I never go anywhere without my carpetbag full of the adventuress's essentials; always including my battered hip flask of gin. But supposedly, since my clothes had been so mysteriously whipped off my person during these proceedings, the rather peculiar form of travel I had endured meant that my invitation to this world stipulated I bring nothing, quite literally, but myself.

I hopped out of my bed of blue moss and decided I really must go on the lookout for something to wet my whistle.

Well, I wasn't expecting what came next. I should have, really. I'm meant be up on things like what life is like on other planets. But on this occasion I forgot myself and jumped up far too enthusiastically.

I shot through the air about thirteen feet and came down with a bump, sending up clouds of bright blue dust. Bloody gravity.

I'll spare you the details of my having to spend round about an hour learning how to walk again. But by the end of it I had discovered the tiny amount of effort I would have to make to get myself about the place here on Neptune. It was like walking in a dream. I got the feeling that if I suddenly burst into a sprint I would shoot screaming off the surface of the planet.

In the end I compromised in a kind of lurching hop-hop-jump across the surprisingly arid surface of my new world. Gods knew what I looked like; starkers and bouncing about the place. At least Harriet wasn't there to see me. I could imagine the look on her face.

On Earth I'm not the gainliest of creatures.

Harriet once remarked tt I look like a brown paper parcel tied up badly with string. But this is an old woman's body I'm inside, so what do you expect? It's like the photographer. Eve Arnold, once told Joan Crawford,

when the ageing actress expressed an interest in posing for nudie pictures: Something happens to flesh after fifty.

So, at home on Earth I'm quite used, and accepting of, inhabiting a body that sags and droops and bulges. I see my ungainliness as a kind of physical record of the life I have lived. Each wrinkle and each spare tyre tell a number of stories of their own.

But here on Neptune, it was suddenly like being young. I didn't need as much energy to get about the place. In a single bound I could cover a huge expanse of ground.

Gravity, it turned out, had decided to be exceedingly kind to me.

I couldn't wait to come upon a full-length mirror. It would be, I decided, like having an all-over body-lift.

It was while I was hopping about, all full of myself because of my unexpected rejuvenation, that I came across the building.

Now this was very exciting. I knew nothing about life on Neptune.

The building had four walls and was built from the bright blue slate of this region.

I bounded up to it with far more bravado than I actually felt. It turned out to be just four feet high. Were they midgets on this world? Would I be like Gulliver in Lilliput, or his long-neglected wife coming after him, and falling prey to the same inquisitive gnomes? There didn't seem to be any doors or windows on the side nearest me, but I crept up, keeping my footsteps as small as could be. I took hold of the blue wall and peered at the roof.

Some kind of quite transparent, quartz-like material canopied this small structure and I could see right through it. I blinked.

I was staring at a few hundred perfectly round, indigo eggs. Each was a foot in diameter and they were squashed in together in such a way that you feared for whatever was due to break out of them.

And while I stared I realised that six of the bloody things had already started to hatch. The eggs skins came apart oh-so delicately; cracking like the flimsiest ice while tiny hands and feet inside worked away at demolishing the walls of their cells.

I was reminded of the Gunther Grass poem. The one about "we are all inside the egg," when he goes on to wonder who's going to crack him open

and gollop him into a hot frying pan. Well, that wasn't a very comforting thought for me to be having, at all.

I watched them hatch and I was appalled — I must admit, even cosmopolitan old me — at the hideous things that came out, all damp and oily and dazed-looking.

They were, in turn, startled and blinking in the sunshine as it came refracting through their crystal ceiling. The sight of me looming massively over them must have been pretty diverting, too.

They seemed mostly body, with tiny scrawny heads, attenuated, slippery necks and seven legs, or, as I was told some time later, three legs and two arms with an intermediary pair of limbs which could come in useful as either arms or legs. Their eyes were all over the place. Goggling fish eyes wedged at irregular intervals into their tiny, bald skulls.

I remember thinking at the time: what queer and hideous beasties these natives of Neptune, these… Nepotists, are! Little knowing yet just how wrapped up in their affairs I was about to become.

They were a kind of green-blue in colour. A stunning aquamarine, quite at odds with their environment. I later learned that, as the creatures matured, the males turned greener while the women became bluer, which seems accurate enough to me.

Then they started agitating inside their peculiar nest, jostling the as-yet unhatched eggs causing hairline fractures all over the place. At the sight of me these ferociously ugly children started to gnash their vicious, upward-turning tusks and thrashing about their many limbs. Very off-putting. Even at this size the creatures looked as if they could do a fair amount of damage.

I was so busy taking in all these fascinating details that I completely failed to notice the approach of a score of full-grown Nepotists from behind me.

Coming, as they did, over the soft and soundless moss, which covers practically the entire surface of Neptune with the exception of the seas at the poles and the scattered towns and villages, they might have captured me easily, but their intentions were far more sinister. It was the rattling of their sabres that gave me the tip-off.

It was the rasping, tinny sounds of their blades being produced that made me whirl around and face them. And what a sight greeted me when I did!

They were like devils, surrounding me. A party of full-grown Nepotists, each of them brandishing a sabre; each of them champing their formidable teeth and grinding their tusks.

I was in no doubt as to whom the leader was. He was up on a horse-type thing (quite blue too, with its head lowered and its hefty shoulders quivering in exhaustion). The leader looked absolutely piques with rage and it was his sabre that was rattling the most.

How vulnerable I suddenly felt! Undressed and quite alone!

This man, if I may call him that, had the usual extraordinary number of limbs and he was about fifteen feet tall.

Before any of us could say anything, we were interrupted by his horse-type thing suddenly opening its mouth and giving a dreadful yawn. And what a mouth! What a north-and-soulh! Its massive head seemed to crack right in two, revealing a bright white tongue and leathery, liquoricey lips.

I stole another glance, before all the inevitable questions started, and this beast had a strange number of legs as well. This seemed to be the tiling on Neptune. I tell abashed at having only four limbs on show.

Behind this first demon ranged nineteen others, similar in most respects, but, as I learned later, there was quite a bit of variation. But I couldn't take it all in as I stared up at this nightmarish crowd.

I had to defend myself. That was the first thing.

This leader fella gave a jab in my direction with his sabre and, my reflexes working with astounding efficiency, I gave one of my fantastic little hops and jumped straight onto the crystal roof of the things with all the eggs in. Now at least I could face my aggressors eye to eye.

Their eyes were quite revolting, however. No two Nepotists had then) in the same place on their polished skulls, and there was a great variation in their number. Each eye was rheumy and yellowy and all were directed, somewhat harshly, at my person.

It was up on this slippery vantagepoint that I received my next surprise.

Each member of this hunting party was emphatically male. Each member was as naked as I was and each was in proud possession of precisely two equally proportioned members. My eyes nearly popped out of my head at this revelation. Let's say that my scientific curiosity was duly aroused.

I didn't have time to dwell on the singularity of their double-cocked nature because each of the twenty Nepotists, as of one accord, waggled their swords at me. I took fright and quite forgot myself; jumping backwards off the roof of the edifice, quite forgetting the nature of the local gravity.

I bounced backwards some thirty feet.

As I whizzed through the heady air I could see they were all amazed.

I dropped unharmed onto soft blue moss. I grunted and sat up, and watched them thunder towards me again. Some were staring at me in what I would like to describe as awe.

The others had trotted over to the incubator thing and seemed to be checking that I hadn't been interfering with the eggs. 'Of course!' I realised wearily. 'They're only worried that I wanted to steal their hatchlings.' Silly of them. What would I want with those hideous brutes? Now they were talking amongst themselves in low, guttural tones, and jabbing elegant, tapered blue fingers (each tipped in golden nails) in my general direction. They were deciding what to do with me.

As I listened I realised I could make out exactly what they were saying. I was glad. I hate feeling left out. One of those concerned for the hatchlings' safety came ambling towards his leader. "They're alright. She didn't touch them."

The leader fella snorted. "Just as well."

"They're starting to hatch. There are some perfect specimens. Little darlings."

The leader grunted again. "You needn't get too attached." Then he gazed suspiciously back at me. "But what are we going to do with this one?"

"She looks so old and haggard," said one of his fellows (I bridled at this, but kept my mouth shut.) "She ought to be decrepit. How could she launch herself so high off the ground? How can she leap about like that?"

The leader looked thoughtful. "Either she is possessed of great powers," he rumbled. "Powers which even we Nepotists have no inkling of. Or she comes from a different world."

"A different world?" said the other, incredulously. "Surely you don't believe in that stuff?"

The leader shrugged his various appendages.

'They've got a nerve,' I thought, 'Thinking my being unlikely.' And I pictured myself explaining to Harriet (Alas!) how I met men with multiple

arms, all of bright blue, with twin tadgers each! Really, who was the preposterous here?

"Whatever she is," said the beleaguered Captain from astride his even more beleaguered mount, "She's unusual. And quite an interesting, unexpected catch. She'd be worth showing off."

"Will there be a reward?" piped up one of his subordinates.

The leader gave him a withering glance.

I was starting to wonder who I would prefer to be captured by. These freakish men this morning; or last night's ruffians? Blue Nepotists or scruffy Yorkshire villagers? In my mind the two parties were oddly linked and I couldn't decide which fate was the most alarming. I was between the devil and the deep blue sea. Stuck between Scylla and Charabdys. I would just have to do what you always ought to do in situations that seem, at the time, to be insoluble; I would give myself up to the fabulous randomness of fate. Let the future decide for itself. And wait for a better opportunity to present itself. And then we'd see who was top dog.

Besides, they all had guns as well as sabres. They looked like old-fashioned blunderbusses and there was no way I wanted one of them shooting up my old arse!

The Nepotists, after they had chuntered on for a bit, deciding what to do, turned their horse things around and rode back the way they had come. After a few hundred yards they stopped and looked back at me. Their leader stayed with me.

'Crumbs,' I thought. ' Now I'm for it.'

He grinned at me in an altogether ghastly fashion. I reciprocated nervously. It's worth hanging onto your manners, I believe, no matter what the circumstances are.

Then, in a single, graceful movement, he hopped oft his lizard-like mount and moved towards me on his three sturdy legs. I couldn't help myself shuffling backwards slightly. Nor could I forbear staring at his two astonishing penises as they swayed before my eyes.

Then he threw down his blunderbuss and his sabre. His meaning was plain. 'Thank buggery,' I thought.

He ambled closer in his lopsided manner and, as he approached, unfastened a golden bracelet from one of his surprisingly thin and elegant

wrists. This he held out towards me.

"Would you take this?" he enquired in a far less guttural tone.

I beamed. "I'd be delighted."

For a moment he seemed taken aback that I not only understood, but could speak his language as well as him. However, with perfect breeding and good manners, he stifled his amazement and urged me to take his gift. Which I did. It was a lovely thing; all cool and quite supple to the touch.

"Thank you very much," I said, fastening the bracelet thing onto my own wrist and finding it a perfect fit. "I must say, it's really very good of you not to start shooting at me or tying me up or taking me prisoner. It's so nice to come across a truly civilised race. I am Iris Wildthyme. It's lovely to meet you."

He nodded stiffly, but didn't reply.

A tense silence hung between us. 'Maybe,' I thought, 'I've got the local protocol completely wrong.' It wouldn't have been the first time. I gave a funny little curtsey.

Then he gave the signal for his fellows to come back. It was as if I had passed a kind of test. They started towards us with a jubilant burst of speed, but were checked by another signal from their leader. I suppose he thought I might take fright and jump straight out of the picture again.

He didn't want to lose me.

Oh, I'm a silly old fool!

Such easy prey to flattery!

"Would you like to ride with us?" he asked, quite gently, and slapped the rump of his substantial mount.

I had to think twice about this.

I got on.

But I rode side-saddle, it has to be said.

PLUTO

THE INVISIBLE PEOPLE by MARK PHIPPEN and LEIGH HOOPER

They say this planet once had six suns For the last two decades I haven't even seen one of them.

It was a virus, or at least that's what they called it. The doctors were working on it they had said; there would be a breakthrough soon. That was twenty four years ago Twenty four years of living underground, sealed off from the rest of the population for fear of further contagion. Containment. Of five hundred and twenty nine people.

I know that figure because I had been given the task of census keeper. It was my job to keep track of all the survivors, their location, and of course the deaths. The figure was now one hundred and five.

It was a mundane task, but at least it gave me something to do.

The monotony of the job put me on autopilot, let me switch off.

With precious little to do every small task became a way to cling to life. I guess that's how I've kept my sanity And believe me, there have been many that haven't. All too common was the co-inhabitor who decided to leap into a ventilation fan, or take to their fellow inmates with a crowbar. All just a statistics now in a world of victims

The route took me around most of the complex, and I probably knew the place better than anyone. At least, anyone still alive. The length of time we had been down here meant that little sub communities had formed — people unified by paranoia. These communities were like families (and

often actually were), living together in isolation from the rest of the complex, trusting nobody but their own. And me of course, eventually.

I had to suit up for my rounds, the communities insisted on it. Not for my own protection, but for theirs. A person doing the rounds, visiting everyone in the complex, was a prime candidate as a carrier. Not that the suit would have made much difference, but I didn't tell them that. The virus was airborne; there was nothing I could do that would make matters any better or worse.

The suit was more of a symbol, a reminder of the technological forces at work above ground, forces searching for a cure. It was a faint glimmer of hope in a dark subterranean world. I traced the same route every three rotations from my dwelling on sub level two up to the main access hanger. Often I would pause at the huge metal doors and imagine myself reaching through to touch the real world. Of course, beyond them was half a klick of tunnels and access shafts until you reached the foundations of the City, but that doesn't matter when you're dreaming. Then down from the hangar through the levels towards the industrial and maintenance section where the antiquated and patched together systems pumped and hissed in a monotony mirroring our own.

I did the same route daily; saw the same places, the same faces. Even the occasional discovery of a community that had fallen victim to the virus was now routine; seal them off, log the deaths, and try to ignore the screams of those still alive from behind the bulkhead door. In the beginning I would never have believed that I could get used to that. But you do. Desensitised they call it. Every day the same. Until the day I found the blue box.

It was standing in the comer of a bend in the corridor between sections five and six, a corridor I walk everyday. And it was not alone. A man I had never seen before was examining one of the walls, trying to peel the rust away to see the wording underneath. I was so surprised at seeing a stranger that standard security procedures went out of the window. "Erm… " I said. Not terribly impressive.

"Ah, hello there." Said the man, spinning round, and looking a little embarrassed to have been caught.

"Tell me," he said, "did it make any difference? I mean, the toppling of the Usurians? Did it make things better?"

I was a little taken aback by this, and for the moment I let the fact that he had avoided my question pass. "It depends what you mean by "better" I

suppose.” I replied ‘If you mean would we rather be ruled by alien blobs than by our own kind, then I’d take the latter anyday, but this planet is still divided into the haves and have nots. There is still a plutocracy on Pluto.” I couldn’t help but chuckle at that thought. It made the suit shake.

‘It’s the same with revolutions the universe over,” the man sighed, “no matter how noble the cause, the high ideals of the revolutionaries soon give way to the desire for power. Even a dictator who just wants to make life better is still a dictator.”

I nodded, not quite sure what to say. This stuff was ancient history. The Usurians had been ousted hundreds of years ago, why was he bringing it up now. And for that matter, who was he?

‘Who are you? How did you get here?”

“Well, I’m the Doctor, and, well … Ah!” the Doctor was looking over my shoulder “and this is Nyssa.” He seemed thankful for her arrival at that moment.

I turned to see a young girl. Attractive, with an aristocratic face framed by curls of thick brown hair. Her matching plum coloured velvet trousers and jacket looked expensive, and I got the impression that this girl, Nyssa the Doctor had called her, was from the elite classes. So what was she doing down here?

I turned back to the man. “You say you’re a Doctor? Is there some news? You’ve found a cure?”

“Cure? Cure for what?” The Doctor looked genuinely puzzled.

“The virus of course. Why else would you be down here?”

‘I’m sorry, Nyssa and I have just arrived, we don’t know anything about a virus. How serious is it?”

“Just arrived? You mean from up top? Then surely you know the situation down here.” This was getting weirder.

“Yes, that’s right, we’re from, erm, “up top’. We thought we’d pop down and see how you’re doing.” I didn’t believe a word of it, and I told them as much. We hadn’t had a visitor down here in twenty-three years. The last one who had visited us had never left.

“Look, wherever we’re from, my friend here really is a Doctor,” said the girl, Nyssa, “Perhaps we could help you.”

Well, let’s face it, we could do with all the help we could get, and it didn’t matter where these two were from, they wouldn’t be going back. But for all I knew they could be carriers.

“Show me your hands.” I said, trying to sound authoritative. They exchanged puzzled looks, but held out their hands. They were clear of the virus. That much was obvious — the hands are the first to go, yet theirs were totally opaque. “Okay, so you seem clear, or to be more accurate, you’re not clear. So you’re a doctor? We haven’t had one of those down hear for twelve years. You could be useful. The infirmary’s this way.”

The Doctor looked a little taken aback, but followed me all the same.

Upon reaching the infirmary I struck the door panel, the mechanism creaked with age as we entered. “Lights.” I barked, ushering the Doctor and Nyssa in. Plasma surged into the lighting conduit, dispelling the darkness. The antiseptic smell filled my nostrils, the only part of the complex that didn’t smell old and stale. Shiny steel composite units held little in the way of supplies, only so much was recyclable.

The Doctor was immediately drawn to the figure lying on the observation bed, pulling back the nylon sheet brought a gasp from Nyssa, I drew close to her as a sort of comfort.

“Oh, Doctor it’s…” her voice faltered.

“Remarkable.” he finished “I’ve never seen anything quite like it, continued loss of pigmentation, this is almost like a transformation rather than effects of a virus,” the figure stirred as the Doctor ran his fingers over the flesh, and this seemed to rouse the Doctor from his thoughts. “I want to run some tests, I need some equipment.”

As he began to rummage through drawers, pulling out the odd instrument, I looked over the body on the table. The man’s hair was turning white, and what had once been dark brown eyes, (for I knew him well) were now faded pink. His skin was pale in places, almost translucent in the extremities. His breathing forced grey saliva from between his quivering lips.

Clutching several boxes under his arms the Doctor strode over to Nyssa and I.

“Would you be so kind as to fetch some things from the TARDIS for me, there’s a packed medical case I keep in the arboretum, it should have everything I need.” Without waiting for a response, the Doctor set to work, hunched over the body muttering to himself.

“Of course. Doctor.” Nyssa said to his back. With a roll of her eyes, she turned to leave and I followed.

As we approached the Doctor's TARDIS, Nyssa pulled me to a halt. "Be prepared for a bit of a shock', she told me, pulling the key the Doctor had given her from around her neck and inserting it into a lock on one of the front panels of the blue box. The door swung inward and Nyssa made towards the entrance, pausing when she sensed I wasn't following. "It's perfectly safe, trust me'. And she smiled for the first time since we'd met.

Returning the smile I followed her into the box.

I suppose I should have been surprised, the box *was* bigger on the inside than out, after all. Nyssa was muttering something about transcendental whatevers, but I just nodded and said "Okay'. This whole business was slipping away from me, so I figured the best thing was just to ride along with it.

"It's all quite simply really," she said hastily, when she realised I wasn't going to question her further. "The arboretum is through here." She indicated another door beyond the console.

It turned out the box was full of corridors, snaking about its ulterior in an apparent random pattern. They couldn't have been totally random, though, as Nyssa found her way to the arboretum eventually.

The arboretum, of course, turned out to be a warehouse sized room filled with rows upon rows of neatly arranged and seemingly well cared for plants, some of which I recognised, but most of which looked totally alien to me, and going by the evidence, probably were.

"Okay, so which of you gets the job of watering this lot?" I asked.

"We don't need to, the TARDIS takes care of all that."

"Oh, right. Of course."

Nyssa had opened up a large chest, and had begun packing a medical case she had found within with equipment from its interior.

A thought struck me. "Nyssa?"

"Yes?" Her voice was muffled, coming, as it was, from the inside of the box.

"Why does the Doctor keep his equipment in the arboretum?"

Nyssa lifted her head, and paused in thought for a while. She shrugged. "I've learned not to think about that kind of thing. It's just the Doctor, I guess." That seemed to settle it for her. so I left it. Hefting the now loaded bag, Nyssa made for the door, and I followed. The journey back to the control room seemed to take longer than before, and we passed through an

area overgrown with vines that I was sure I hadn't noticed on the way there. My immediate thought was that Nyssa had taken a wrong turn, but she carried on purposefully. It was more like the TARDIS was shifting itself around us, I realised.

We eventually found our way to the doors, and as we emerged I instantly noticed the darkness after the bright light inside. The plasma light had been smashed. I fumbled for a flare in one of my thigh pads, a sweet sickly smell permeated from all around. I realised then just how clean the air inside the TARDIS had been compared with the complex. "The fight has failed," Nyssa said unnecessarily, as the TARDIS door closed behind us. Not answering I fit the flare it burst into life to reveal two figures looming slowly out of the darkness.

At first they looked like the man in the infirmary but then I could see that they were in a much more advanced state; their skin was totally translucent. The figure to my left, what was once a woman, advanced slowly, her hand to her eyes vainly trying to shield them from the light of my flare. She was unclothed, and I could see organs and bones, her heart pumping, her brain and eyes, her fiver and uterus all connected by a complex road map of veins and arteries. Joints were red and swollen, and grey-green saliva drooled from her open mouth onto a pendent that hang around her neck — a horrible reminder that this creature had once been human.

I backed into Nyssa and her hand grasped my shoulder. I could sense movement behind us; my hand fell to touch a storage barrel. Hoping it was empty enough for me to throw I tilted it and my heart sank as I found it was nearly full. As the liquid sloshed and dripped from the valve, the smell was unmistakable; diesel. Most systems used plasma injection motors but some cheap low priority systems still utilised diesel power.

I lit a second flare and shouted "Nyssa, get back." It was then I felt violent movement behind me and Nyssa screamed. The two terrible figures in front of me lunged forward. I pulled the barrel over with all the strength I could muster, and the valve ripped off in my hands. Fuel gushed out as I kicked the barrel towards the second figure, a male. It struck his shins bowling him over. I threw the first flare at the barrel and swung round, I could feel the heat through my suit and I could hear the screams behind me as I ran forward.

A figure wearing an environment suit like mine had Nyssa around the throat and was dragging her away from the light of the flames, his uncovered eyeballs seemed to stare wildly at me, running to him I jammed the second flare in his face as hard as I could. The figure screamed and released Nyssa grabbing her arm I dragged her away. “Come on run!” I shouted stooping to pick up the supply case. The light was better around the comer and once down the corridor we paused.

“Have you ever seen anything like that before?” Nyssa said almost breathless.

“No,” I replied “Never.”

“We should get back to the Doctor.” Nyssa said.

I was about to agree when we heard a cry. Not the hideous wail of those creatures, but a cry out for help, the sound of a child’s voice. We reached a section where four tunnels converged. Just down one corridor was the entrance to a dwelling; the door was lying broken on the floor. Standing in the doorway I could see into the room. A half-naked creature was crouched in the centre of the room.

A girl I recognised as Julie was climbing into a vent, upon seeing me she stopped; following Julie’s gaze the creature turned to face me. Snarling, it stood up. It held a length of wood and stared impassively at me, my stare darted to Julie as large veined hands emerged from the vent and pulled her in. “Behind us!” shrieked Nyssa. Turning I saw two more up abominations advance from across the intersection, frozen I stood impotent with fear.

“The girl,” I said wearily.

“It’s no use, run!” Nyssa hissed as she pulled at me. Seeing the way to the Infirmary was blocked, I took us down another corridor where I knew there was the maintenance hatch we could use.

Minutes later as we sat in the small maintenance

tube I began to sob as I thought of the little girl. Seeing my distress, Nyssa pulled me to her and I buried my face in her velvet top drowning myself in her embrace.

“There was nothing you could have done.” her voice was almost a whisper.

“We should push on, the Doctor will wonder where we’ve got to.” I said, smiling. She returned my smile, and it seemed warmer than before.

Emerging from the maintenance hatch into the corridor I could immediately sec the section still had power. Helping Nyssa out we made our way to the Infirmary. We found the Doctor there, tending to a man laying on one of the beds. The patient, it was clear to me, was a hopeless case, the skin of his arms had faded completely, the veins and arteries that were pumping the virus around his body were clearly visible and his lips were so pale you could see his teeth through them.

The Doctor didn't seem to have noticed that we had entered, his back was to the entrance, and so engrossed was he in his examination that he had obviously not heard the hiss of the door.

It was I who broke the silence. "He's a goner Doctor, nothing much we can do for him now."

The Doctor sighed. "I know, I know." He placed the syringe he had been holding onto the equipment tray beside the bed. I noticed that it was full of the patient's blood. "But there may be something he can do for us."

I noticed Nyssa was looking at the Doctor, a frown on her face. "What's the matter?" I asked her. "Doctor," she said, ignoring me, "Doctor, what's wrong with your hand?"

He turned slowly to face us. It was plain from his expression that he was in great pain. His left hand was tucked under his right arm, something I had failed to notice when we entered.

"Nothing," he said through gritted teeth 'just caught it on one of the Bunsens, got a slight burn. Nothing to worry about."

"Show me." There was steel in Nyssa's voice that surprised me somewhat.

Sheepishly, the Doctor withdrew his hand, and held it out to Nyssa. It was clearly not a bum, the skin was faded, and the bones of his fingers, particularly the knuckles, were visible, as if they had broken the surface. Nyssa gasped.

"It's quite alright, really, as long as I don't wiggle my fingers." The Doctor said, doing just that and wincing.

"Doctor, you've been infected; this virus is getting out of control. Those creatures out there…

I cut her short. "That's impossible. When the host dies, so does the virus. You can't become infected by the dead."

"I thought you said that the virus was airborne." The Doctor was glaring at me.

‘ It is, but only in close proximity to a host, a live one.”

“Then the virus must be mutating, finding a way of outliving its host. I’d imagine…” the Doctor stopped, as Nyssa’s words finally sank in. “Creatures? What creatures?”

“Infected citizens, they attacked us on the way here.” I explained. “I’ve never seen anyone reach that stage and live. Until now, the virus has simply attacked and killed its host, but now it seems to be keeping them alive.”

“Then it’s worse than I thought,” the Doctor said. “When was this man found?” He indicated the body on the bed.

“Only yesterday. A fairly routine procedure; isolate his quarters, remove the body and bring it back here to be incinerated.”

“About what time?”

“I can tell you precisely.” I checked my datapad. “Exactly 20:37.”

“And how long had he been dead?”

“Hard to tell, he’s in a pretty advanced state, as you can see. But I’d say just a few hours.”

The Doctor stuck his hands in Iris pockets, and then gingerly withdrew the infected hand, grimacing as he did so. “If that’s true then this new development must be very recent, certainly within the last few hours. And that indicates that the virus is mutating at a phenomenal rate. I wonder what has caused… “ The Doctor was interrupted by a crashing sound from some way along the corridor outside. It sounded like something metal hitting the floor. With a start I realised it was the metal grille across the maintenance hatch that Nyssa and I had escaped through. I ran to the door, out into the corridor, and very nearly straight into a creature lumbering toward the infirmary. I pulled myself up short, and managed to change direction, diving into the room. I yelled at Nyssa to close the door.

I picked myself up from the floor where I had fallen in my haste, and ran to help her set the locking mechanism. To make doubly sure, we wedged gurneys and chairs against the door. The Doctor, mean while, was unpacking the medical equipment with his one good hand.

“I don’t think that will hold them for long.” Nyssa said, as the creature began to hammer on the door. I couldn’t believe how calmly she said it, like she did this sort of thing all the time. But she looked so delicate.

“It was only one. The male who attacked us outside the TARDIS, I think. He must have followed us here.”

“That’s very likely.” The Doctor had set up a microscope and was sliding a sample into place. “The organism’s main intent will be to find new hosts. To propagate itself.” He looked into the eyepiece of the equipment.

“But that would indicate intelligence.” I pointed out. “So, okay, a virus’s main point is to spread itself, to infect. But to *control* a host in order to find others would mean that the virus…”

“This organism isn’t a virus.” The Doctor said, his eye not leaving the microscope. “It’s a life form. I’ve seen it before, here on Pluto.”

“When you were here last?” Nyssa asked.

“No, before that,” the Doctor winced; the pain was obviously getting to him. “Before the humans came. This organism is all that’s left of the indigenous population of Pluto.”

This didn’t make sense to me. “But the surveys before we colonised… “

“Were inadequate. A botched job performed by a company who’s biggest concern was profit, not the safety of the colonists, and certainly not for any life forms already here.”

“But there would have been evidence, even after terraforming. You can’t just wipe a species from existence.”

“They didn’t need to; the destruction of the moon Charon did that for them, or at least very nearly. But had they been looking in the right places, or indeed, if they’d cared at all, they’d have found that the planet wasn’t quite as dead as they had thought.” The Doctor looked up, stared me straight in eyes. “We are talking thousands of years of evolution here. Not much in the grand scheme of things but enough to make a difference. Enough for a life form to find new ways of propagating itself.”

“There must be something we can do to stop it.” Nyssa was being practical. When she spoke it was a statement of fact, rather than a desperate plea. I was shaking like a leaf.

“A serum? Perhaps, yes perhaps. I’ll need your help though.”

As the Doctor and Nyssa set to work, I sat wearily down on one of the chairs we had used to blockade the door. I listened to them for a while, but the science went over my head. The banging from outside had stopped now, and before long I found myself drifting off to sleep. I had the usual dream.

My sleep assisted travels above ground were interrupted by a cry from the Doctor. At first I though we were under attack, but I sleepily realised he had shouted out a word; “Eureka’.

“What does that mean?” I said, shuttling over to the Doctor and Nyssa, making a mental note not to fall asleep in my suit again as I rubbed my aching joints.

“I’ve found it.” The Doctor replied.

“Found what? A “eureka’?”

“Never mind,” he said, shaking his head. I noticed then that he had gotten much worse. The translucency had spread up his arm, to his shoulder and neck, and was creeping around his cheek to his face. I looked at my chrono; I had only been asleep a couple of hours, yet Doctor’s infection had spread in a manner I would have expected in a couple of days.

“The Doctor’s found a serum, or at least he thinks he has.” Nyssa explained. She indicated the phial that the Doctor was holding.

“With a lot of help from Nyssa here, of course.” The Doctor still managed a grateful smile at his companion through his now fading lips.

I couldn’t beheve what I was hearing. I’d been here for twenty-four years, waiting for that magical cure to be found by the doctors ‘up top’ and these two had been here less than twenty-four *hours* and here they were claiming to have the answer. It didn’t make sense, and I told them so.

“Well, to be fair, we are working at an advantage. I’m familiar with the organism and the equipment we have is somewhat advanced. But I do admit, it does seem a long time.”

“So who are you going to try it on?” I asked. “Are you suggesting we go out there and capture one of those creatures?”

“No, no need for that. I think my infection is advanced enough for me to be the test subject.” And before Nyssa and I could stop him, the Doctor downed the contents of the phial.

“Doctor, no!” Nyssa shouted, rather too late.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure everything will be fine.” The Doctor’s voice was cracking, and his throat was rasping. “I’ll just…” The Doctor collapsed in a heap on the floor, gasping for breath.

“Get him on a gurney! “ I shouted, and Nyssa ran to help me lift him. As he lay on the trolley, his breathing began to steady, though it remained very shallow. “What do we do now?”

“We wait, and observe. That’s all we can do.” Nyssa replied.

The Doctor’s breathing remained steady, and his hearts (it turned out he had two) still seemed to be holding out. But Nyssa and I watched as the virus continued to spread across his face and down his chest.

“That can’t be right ” I said

“It’s true that antidotes can sometimes have the effects of making the patient worse before it makes them better. But I agree, it seems to be *accelerating* it.” Nyssa’s calm demeanour was beginning to crack. I guessed that the Doctor meant a lot to her “What was that?” Nyssa whispered

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Shh, listen.”

I listened hard, and at first I couldn’t hear it, but then I caught it. There was a creaking noise It was coming from the vent shaft, which was right above our…

The ceding came crashing down bringing vent shaft, masonry and a cloud of dust pouring into the room. The Doctor’s gurney was sent flying, tipping it over and depositing its occupant on the floor The Doctor lay there, oblivious to it all, as the cloud began to settle, revealing something else that had fallen from the roof.

One of the creatures was pushing masonry away, freeing itself from the rubble It was or had been, a woman She was wading, obviously in pain if not from the fall but from the virus pumping through her body. And there, hanging around her neck was the pendant. It was the woman we had seen by the TARDIS; she and the man must have been working together. Which meant the virus was using what was left of its host’s brains

The woman was now almost completely transformed. Her face was completely overrun by the virus, the muscles snaking their way across the exposed skull and the eyes, the eyes were the worst — a clear mass of jelly criss crossed with a network of veins, a dark pupil seemingly floating across its surface. But she was still alive. The Doctor was right, the life form was evolving all the time, learning to control its host rather than kill it.

But the pain must have been phenomenal, there were gashes across her body, torn, no doubt, by the woman herself in an effort to relieve the pain wracking her body. Only the blood retained its colour, staining the woman’s fingernails.

The woman lunged at us, but her lack of control meant her attack was clumsy, and she stumbled as we dodged her blows The fall had damaged her leg, it looked broken to me, and even the virus couldn’t force her to use it properly.

Nyssa ran to the Doctor and started checking him over. Her movement attracted the creature, which made after her As it couldn’t move very far or

very fast, the creature lunged at Nyssa, throwing its whole body at her. It had her pinned down. Nyssa was kicking at it, and a couple of the blows connected with its leg, prompting a wail from the creature, but no let up in its attack. I steeled myself and launched my own attack, throwing myself onto the creature's back. It merely shrugged me off.

The creature had Nyssa by the throat now — it was going to choke her! So much for finding a new host body, this had obviously become personal. I looked round in desperation for some kind of weapon. The Doctor's medical kit was on the other side of tile room, beyond the overturned gurney and the creature, but there was no time to waste. I took a run at the gurney, vaulting over it with an energy I didn't realise I still had, and landing beside the kit. Grabbing whatever came to hand, I ran towards the creature, lashing out with my new weapon.

Which turned out to be a stethoscope.

The stethoscope bounced ineffectually off the creature's head, but it had been enough to distract it from the task of throttling Nyssa. It looked at me and lunged forward, obviously forgetting about its leg, just one of many pains that wracked its body. The creature stumble, and I was on it. wrapping my stethoscope around its neck and pulling tight. The creature's transparent eyes bulged and I pulled tighter, it's throat making tiny gagging sounds, until eventually it lay still.

"I think it's dead now." Nyssa said from behind me. I realised I was still pulling the stethoscope tight. I let it go and collapsed beside the body.

Nyssa was rubbing her neck, which was bruised, but she seemed otherwise unharmed. "Thanks." She said.

"Don't mention it. How's the Doctor?"

We pulled the gurney out of the way, and turned the Doctor onto his back. Nyssa gasped as we saw the extent of his infection, which was now totally covering his body. I looked at his face, which had once looked so young and intelligent, but was now open, exposed and most unpleasant.

Nyssa gripped the Doctor's hand as she stood over him. "Okay, let's run this through logically," the breathing filter she now wore muffled her voice a little as she ran through recent events. As she spoke I covered the body that lay amongst the rubble. "The Doctor's serum failed but why?"

"Susan?"

"Doctor?"

“Leela, I Jamie no!” as Nyssa leaned over the Doctor writhed and shouted, “I’ll kill you all, never again enter the Temple of Yetaxa!”

The Doctor grabbed Nyssa’s tunic and ripped the arm. Running to him I held the Doctor down as Nyssa held an instrument to his arm, it hissed and the doctor immediately relaxed If it wasn’t for his odd clothing, I bet I could have seen the relaxant surging through his system. Nyssa was close to tears, seeing her friend like this was almost too much.

“Don’t fold up on us now, we need you.” My caring intentions came across almost brutally, but seemed to work Nyssa rallied herself The next hour passed quickly as Nyssa studied the equipment and I busied myself making some sort of weapon. If those things were going to come in again I wanted to be ready. I found a laser scalpel; equipment for complex medical procedures was useless and abandoned with no Doctor around Using another scalpel I welded it to a length of metal pole I ripped from a lamp. I now had a crude cattle prod type weapon. Not much but it made me feel a lot better. “Look at this,” said Nyssa beckoning me.

I looked into the microscope “They’re totally different, even I can see that.”

Smiling, Nyssa said, “The organism is mutating at an alarming rate, maybe that’s the key.” She sat in a chair and rubbed her tired eyes.

“Maybe we arrived just as the virus evolved into a lifeform capable of controlling a host, able to utilise that hosts ability to reason.”

“A virus can’t just metamorphosis into an intelligent being.”

“True, unless it was affected by something or…” she clicked her fingers, “Dormant genes ” Noticing my blank stare she said “Imagine a life form nearly wiped out and drastically changed by something, a cataclysm of some kind.”

“Like the destruction of Charon.”

“Exactly That lifeform would adapt the only way it could, evolve to survive, and now when the opportunity presents itself for them at to re-emerge the dormant genes activate.” She stood up. “All I have to do is alter the serum to key into the new controlling lifeform which is symbiotically linked with the subject, rather than a foreign body like a virus.”

I recalled how the creatures seemed to be frightened of light. Pluto had once been a cold and dark planet. Its indigenous lifeforms would have originally evolved to cope with that. It seemed those in built reactions still

remained. “Can you do it?” I asked as Nyssa punched keys on a piece of equipment.

“The Doctor’s work will be recorded step by step on this analysis machine, it shouldn’t be too difficult to… Oh no! Doctor!” Nyssa ran to the table where the Doctor lay. Over her shoulder I could see the Doctor’s face; it had taken on a faint glow, edges were softened, he seemed almost ethereal.

“Is he dying?”

“Sort of,” said Nyssa, her voice was cold, “We don’t have much time, he’s beginning to regenerate. I’ve seen it before, but it seemed quicker that time. Perhaps the virus is slowing the process down.”

An hour later Nyssa stood holding a small phial. She held the Doctor’s head as she poured its contents down his throat. Almost immediately the glowing stopped and he began to look more human. The serum had obviously worked, and within twenty minutes he was conscious. The Doctor was evidently still in great pain, and Nyssa had to support him as he stood, but the colour was returning to his skin.

“I had the strangest dream, I… well never mind, how are we all then?”

“We’re fine Doctor, and the good news is we can cure people of the infection.” I still found it hard to believe Nyssa’s words.

“Splendid, but I doubt that they will be happy to let you administer it, not to mention the time it would take.” He raised his eyebrows as he looked at me. “Any ideas?”

It came to me in an instant, “The fire suppression system, it covers the whole complex, it’s fed by large reservoirs on level four.”

“Excellent, Nyssa should have no problem making a highly concentrated batch,” he looked around “Is there anything to eat I’m famished.”

Later we set off for the tank room. Having made my electric prod, I felt a little safer. Just a little. I clambered into the vent and began to crawl along, the flashlight I had strapped to my crude weapon lit the area directly in front of me, Nyssa followed me in with the Doctor bringing up the rear.

“Stay close.” I said, I found that I was whispering, my knuckles were white from gripping the stinger.

I didn’t know how well these things heard, but I wasn’t taking any chances. About 50 metres along the path split left and right.

“Which way?” asked Nyssa behind me. Without answering I headed down the right vent, left led towards living quarters and away from the tank room.

Further on I stopped as I reached a grill, below me I could see a section of corridor, my light was the only illumination. I could see a body, or at least legs, against the far wall. I panned the light, a hideous pale face was illuminated staring right at me. I began to back away, stopping when I bumped into Nyssa behind me;

“What is it?” she said startled. Regaining my composure I could see the creature had run away, seared by the light I guessed.

“Nothing, it’s nothing. Let’s move on.” I resumed my slow crawl down the vent.

“It’s rather like being a mole isn’t it?” quipped the Doctor, I envied the calmness in his voice, and imagined mine sounding frail and weak.

After what seemed an age we reached a section I knew to be near the tank room. “There.” I pointed “Just round the comer is a grill we can drop down through into…”

“The tank room?” smiled Nyssa

“Yes” I smiled back. Moving forward brought a terrible creaking from the vent; I could feel it shuddering around us.

“What’s happening?” shouted Nyssa. I was about to answer when the world seemed to fall away. The vent fractured sending us sliding to the floor below. Scrambling to my feet I grabbed my stinger, I sensed movement in the dark.

“Get behind me!” I barked.

“I doubt that rat is very interested in us,” the Doctor said calmly getting to his feet and dusting himself down. The vermin in question sat in my spotlight and stared at me. “Where do we go from here?”

Turning to face the Doctor I said, “Through that door, the tank room is down the corridor on the left.” I strode into the tank room and immediately began checking the levels of water in the 3 huge containers. The room was dimly lit and allowed me to see Nyssa and the Doctor enter. Nyssa walked over to a bank of controls and the Doctor sat on some steps and chatted to the rat as it perched on his knee.

“These two are full, that one’s empty.” I said after reading the gauges.

“The pump system has been off-line for a while but appears to be intact.” Nyssa reported.

The Doctor smiled and I could tell he was still weak, the vent crawl had taken a lot out of him. “Well then, I suppose we just…” the rat jumped down off his knee, stared at the open door for a second, then bolted in the opposite direction. Standing in the doorway was one of the creatures, unclothed, the blood in his system appeared black, and past him two more appeared.

“The door.” The Doctor said the words calmly to Nyssa. Looking at her control panel Nyssa quickly located the door controls. Slamming her hand down brought a grinding from the door and it began to close painfully slowly. The creature looked at the closing door and realising it would be shut away from its targets it began to step forward. The Doctor furiously rooted in his long coat as I began to climb down from the platform. As I reached the bottom he wound up and threw something dark at the beast. It struck it square in the face, rocking it on its heels and behind the closing door.

“Oh good shot Doctor,” Nyssa squealed.

“Yes it was rather, wasn’t it?” facing me he said, “I suggest you start work.” Nodding I opened the top hatch of the nearest tank. I poured in half the phial and closed it; I repeated this with the second tank. Nyssa walked over to the door and peered through the glass panel, just as a hand burst through and grabbed her clothes, she screamed as the Doctor ran to assist her. Concentrating on my task I ran to the control panel and hit the emergency dispersal button.

Nothing happened.

Panic gripped me as I hit it again, still nothing. Then I noticed the start up charge indicator read zero, the power cells had drained over time. Ripping the front panel off revealed the manual pump; I franticly began pumping up the charge as I watched Nyssa and the Doctor struggle. When the charge indicator flashed ready I struck the button, looking up I saw water burst from the valve in the ceding. The Doctor had broken Nyssa free and we watched the water fall. The arm in the door began to change immediately. Pigmentation began to return as it slipped out when the figure collapsed. When the water stopped I opened the door and walked out.

Nyssa stooped to check the figure, a now human looking male. “He’s fine, breathing is laboured, but getting better.”

“Aha,” the Doctor picked something up “there you are.”

“What is it?” I asked. The Doctor held up a battered red sphere.

“That is a cricket ball, do you play?”

It was all pretty much a matter of procedure then. I carried out a survey, my last, I realised, checking on the communities around the complex. The virus had spread incredibly quickly, and very few had escaped its effect. Thankfully, however, the serum had spread just as quickly, and the corridors were littered with the comatose forms of the recovering humans.

Nyssa accompanied me on my travels, for which I was thankful. I’d done this job alone for years, but the company was what kept me going this one last time. Now that the threat was over, we had little to talk about, both of us just thankful to be alive. With what we’d been through, there was no need for conversation; I felt we’d made some kind of connection that went beyond words. Perhaps when we got out of here, we could remain close. It was that thought that brought it home to me; it was all over, I could go home, and it was with that thought that the shock kicked in and I began to cry.

The Doctor had meanwhile set about repairing the communications system, and by the time we got back to him, he had radioed the surface. A team were on their way down.

They arrived suited and armed, of course, ready for trouble of any sort. They were surprised to find me in charge. What had happened to the Director, they asked. I told them that if they’d paid us the occasional visit, rather than simply sent us rations via the air locked supply chute then they might have know that he’d died seven years ago. At least they had the decency to look suitably embarrassed. I think they were surprised to find a woman in charge more than anything, to be honest.

It took a long time to persuade them that the “virus” had been extinguished, even longer to convince them of its true origins. They examined the Doctor and Nyssa’s notes, and took the serum apart molecule by molecule, before finally conceding that, yes, it was *conceivable* that the compound could have worked as a serum against the virus. That’s all they would admit.

But what they couldn’t question was the abundance of now much recovered ex-victims who were being taken back to the surface for medical attention. Some of them had even started to come round. They couldn’t remember a thing, of course.

Some hadn't been so lucky. Several had died at the hands of the out of control creatures, many of which had been their closest loved ones. At least those responsible would have no recollection of what they had done.

The security team took a particular interest in the Doctor and Nyssa of course. No-one seemed to know who they were, which didn't surprise me in the slightest. The Doctor was growing agitated with the questioning, and I got the impression that he would have left by now, if Nyssa had not insisted on staying to make sure that everything was okay.

It was decided that they would be taken "up top" for further questioning, and as Nyssa followed the Doctor out of the door, she threw me a glance. Somehow I knew then that it was the last time I'd see her.

I heard later on that they had managed to escape their escort on the way to the surface. I tried to cover up my laughter when I was told. I managed to slip away myself later, and went to the bend in the corridor between sections five and six. The blue box had gone.

I've been above ground for eight months now, six of them in quarantine. When they were sure I was free of the "virus" (and they still called it that) they set me up with accommodation and a job. In the census department. I suppose they think that's all I can do, after so long counting heads, and I suppose I should be angry, but the truth is the mundane data entry gives me time to think about other, more important, matters.

My colleagues at the census department are friendly enough, but it was they who gave me the first clue that something about my time in containment was amiss. I didn't exactly expect a hero's welcome, but what shocked me was their lack of knowledge about my past. Even my supervisor, when introducing me to the team, seemed vague about what had happened to me, as if trying to recall something he had only read in a report. Which of course he had.

That struck me as odd, surely it was common knowledge that we had been down there? At first I thought they were being polite, in the way you try not to mention the death of a loved one. But some gentle digging revealed that while the older members of staff could vaguely recall seeing something in the news all those years ago, the younger ones knew nothing about it at all.

Turned out they weren't the only ones. I've been doing some research into the period I'd been down there. Twenty-four years ago the entire planet knew about us, for a few weeks at least. The government promised full

attention to our plight, and the public rallied round to fund research into the virus. Hardly a day went by without us being headline news in the newscasts at first, but then, as the public began to forget about us, the media turned its attention to more pressing matters. Like the Governor's latest affair.

Five years after we had been isolated, a five-line report on page thirty-two of the newscast reported that funding for the search for a cure had been cut by the government. We were no longer a priority. We had been there all the time but we were yesterday's news. In the mids of the population, we had been forgotten about, ceased to exist. If you can't see it, it isn't happening. We had become invisible people.

CHARON

WHO PAYS THE FERRYMAN by HELEN FAYLE

Even lit by the artificial suns, moonrise in the Pluto/Charon binary system is a sad, sorry thing compared to the same phenomena on Earth No pockmarked, shining silver orb to light up the night sky here; Charon, Ferryman of Hades, hides himself under his robes to conceal his burnt, twisted body. The price you pay for being first in the line of fire. How well I know that feeling Poor, poor Charon A boat full of coins could not have saved the ferryman when death came knocking at the door

Sometimes, I can almost feel the ghosts of my personal dead surrounding me. Perhaps never more so than here,

I think There's a certain mythical symmetry to this place that I find hard to resist.

Vivienne tells me I worry about it all too much these days, and perhaps she's right. But then, neither of us is quite who we once were.

Rather like this poor, charcoaled little moon

"The sensors show that it's quite dead."

Vivienne looks up from the console, staring past me at the monitor screen, her hazel eyes fixed on the blackened ball that hangs in space beneath us.

She looks nervous, and I sympathise. Sometimes, I think I take her for granted. Why she puts up with me is sometimes a mystery. We've been through so much over the past few years, she and I in our searches for Blaise, the ice forests of Breceliande, and the TARDIS. My past, present and future, not necessarily in that order.

My past and future, however, I have chosen, for now, to ignore. Let sleeping Time Lord's lie, I say. I am Taliesin. Let Merlin await his turn. It will come soon enough.

"I was summoned." I tell her. "I'm curious as to why."

"Are you sure it's safe to go down?"

I smile at her. "Of course. They wouldn't ask otherwise," I answer.

"Who?"

A vain hope, perhaps, that she wouldn't ask. In another life, she made her living out of asking questions. In a way, she still does. I cup her chin in my hand, tilting her heart-shaped face until my eyes can meet hers. "Will you trust me?" I ask. She nods.

But then, I knew she would.

I ask the TARDIS to land, and she takes us down below the surface of the devastated wasteland that is Charon.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there is a breathable atmosphere in the remains of the old transit station. The cave has been decked out with black and red drapes, embroidered with occult symbols from a dozen worlds and times. And a woman, in black robes, waiting for us, standing in front of a skull clad altar. I have the strangest feeling I should know her from somewhere, despite her face being hooded.

I should know her — or he should? For a moment a memory stirs. Vivienne takes my hand, concerned. The woman in black claps her hands in delight. The sleeves of her robe fall away from her hands, revealing a network of criss-crossing scars along her wrists, one wound still new. Blood rites: how very melodramatic.

"Bravo!" She exclaims. She walks forward, slowly, examining me it seems from all angles. "You really are a quite beautiful paradox in your own right." She smiles, but it is a smile of triumph, not of joy. "A Doctor who is not, an impossibility waiting to happen!" She stands in front of me, and stares into my face.

"Hello, Merlin."

I flinch. Knowing what the name means for me, for my future, how could I not?

How many people are given to know more of their future than their past? I have a link to the one, yet I am bound to the other.

The woman removes her hood. She is younger than I had first thought. Dark haired, pretty, albeit with a petulant set to her mouth. Memory stirs in

the breast, fluttering like a raven's wing. This face, overlaid with a tracery of black lines.

Flutter — Vivienne's face, younger than now, with the same marks.

"The Andromedan sunsets just have to be seen to be believed…"

"In the past I've routed them, incarcerated them…"

Flutter — Feelings. Panic, urgency, and irritation at a tall fair-haired man who really doesn't deserve to be shouted at.

"As for the Eye of Orion. Ah, glorious countryside. A high bombardment of positive ions. Sweet smelling mists that roll across the countryside. It's a bit like England. Perhaps that why I like it so much."

"…cast them into space, but nothing ever stops them!"

Flutter — Men of steel giving unholy communion. Unconscious bodies in the village streets.

"Yes. So many wonderful sights and so long since I've seen any of them. But that's going to change."

"They're like a disease!"

Flutter — the woman s face again, her head cradled against my/his shoulder.

"We're going to see everything… Twice!"

"Can nothing ever stop them?"

Flutter — Another woman with a light streak in her dark hair, her face marred by exposed circuitry.

"What do you say to that, Lesley?"

"Prepare phase four…"

And a name.

"Lesley."

Ghosts of the dead. They aren't supposed to walk. Rather like ghosts of impossible pasts. Or futures.

Beside me, Vivienne breathes a name. "Faction Paradox."

The woman turns to her. "Perceptive. As ever, Sarah-Jane." She turns again to me. "We have an offer to make."

I find a convenient outcropping of rock to sit on, pushing the long panels of my black coat out of the way. It's a new one, and shows the dust terribly. Vivienne stays close by, her hand on my shoulder.

"The Faction can have nothing to offer me, anymore." I tell her. Bravado, mostly, but a part of me acknowledges that it is true. She laughs.

“On the contrary. We have a lot to offer you.” With a wave of her hand, an image forms in front of us: I recognise the planet shown (how could I not? Part of me is buried there. Briefly.) Vivienne, beside me, draws a sharp breath. Nine women walking away from a ruined building on Dronid; an ornate casket buried under the rubble as a young woman with dark brown hair triggers the explosives she’s set. Memory flutters again. Dorotheé. I know/knew all of those women, once. Nine women; nine queens to guide the departed to Avalon. One of them stands beside me.

The scene changes. A vast hall in the middle of nowhere — a fractal pocket of space/time filled to capacity with beings from all times and cultures. Not all of them is grieving, despite the occasion. Iris is in her element. One would almost think she was enjoying the wake.

And a young, bearded, red haired man approaches a woman with greying dark hair and hazel eyes, and makes her an offer she cannot refuse.

Her hand tightens briefly on my shoulder. Without thinking, I reach up and catch it in my own.

“Did I really look that young?” I whisper. Her mouth twitches as she holds back a smile.

Lesley’s face holds a hungry look, for a moment. “An interesting choice.”

I run my fingers through my hair, thinking that it’s about time I asked Vivienne to cut it again. The beard could use a trim as well.

“It was my choice to make,” I tell her.

“Of all of them to go back for?” She sneers. “But then, you saved her, from the poison I died of.” Her voice catches slightly, revealing more than she realises.

“It was a different strain.” The memory is stronger than I thought. It’s strange somehow, the way the veil moves sometimes over the past. Black curls, thinning despite an apparent age younger than any before him. A tendency to dress in black. “Besides,” I continue, keeping my voice mild. “You’re alive now.”

“A paradox. A return from death to life. A bargain made, and one only possible because of the nature of your —” she pauses, hunting for the right term. “— predecessor.”

Vivienne steps forward. “Why don’t you save the hyperbole and just get to the point?”

Lesley ignores her, and looks lip at me. “A choice. Doctor.”

“Taliesin.” I correct her.

She shrugs, and continues: “A choice. A chance to save another. One less ghost to haunt you.”

I shake my head. “The ghosts of the future haunt me, not the past. They’re all dead and gone.” I wish I believed it.

“Sara. Katarina. Adric. Angela. Kim. Roslyn.” She offers each name almost as a mantra. “The offer is free and clear. No obligation.” Her voice softens, pleads. “Please, why not accept? All of them died unjustly, before their time.”

Yes, I know this. I also know why such things should be left in the past.

A scent of roses, the rustle of paper as a page is turned. “You’re making the offer to the wrong man. I’m not the Doctor.”

“That’s not what I hear.” She points to Vivienne. “Why else would she be with you? Why else would you have requested a chance to go back for this one, out of all of his companions? Of them all, you just happen to choose the first one he loved.” She laughs, and the sound echoes strangely in the cavern. She leans towards me. “What did you bribe the ferryman with to bring you back from the other side?”

“A paradox.” I offer, with a grin. Beside me, I can almost feel Vivienne smile. So this woman wants to talk in riddles, does she? Well now, that’s my forte, isn’t it? “You offer me a chance to save what I didn’t destroy, so that you can benefit from the chaos caused?” I laugh. My turn for riddles. “I am the ultimate paradox — I have been everything and nothing, new-born and reborn, bound and free. I have drunk from the waters of the Lethe, the Acheron and the Styx. I’ve been burned by the waters of the Phlegethon.” I smile at her. “And your little coven have no part of me, or power over me.”

Lesley is not amused. “You speak nonsense!” She sounds so bitter, so hard.

But then, in the darkness of my nightmares, they all do. “You want nonsense?” I put a finger to my lips: “Blerwm, Blerwm, Blerwm.” She doesn’t understand the joke.

Behind her, in the shadows, I can almost see them moving. Ghosts of the dead, awaiting a return journey from the farthest shore? Thought and Memory playing tricks: projecting images, wish fulfilment, a guilty conscience? Perhaps. Just not mine.

A flutter of raven wings.

“Let the dead rest in peace,” I tell her.

If only they did. I draw Vivienne closer to me briefly. Would I make this choice if she had been amongst the dead? Keeping my arm around her, I turn and walk back toward the TARDIS.

"Is that your answer?" She almost screams the question at me. "We offer you the chance to bring back the dead, to give them back the life they had, and you walk away?"

I give Vivienne the key, and turn to face Lesley again. "I told you, you're asking the wrong man." Do I believe this myself? Probably not, if the truth be told. One day, it won't be the truth.

But not for a while yet. I wear a black coat, floor length, cut for riding, not an afghan. I am Taliesin, reborn from the goddess, with a new life. I have a whole new universe to discover.

I am not Merlin. I am not the Doctor.

I will be Merlin. I was the Doctor.

Paradox. Perhaps. I have been many things in my times. Maybe that's why they want me.

I am not the man I was, or the man I will be.

But I am, for my sins, myself. And I will not be used. Or taunted. Least of all by the ghosts of a past that I am not yet ready to claim for my own, or those of a future that I am not yet willing to be claimed by.

A paradox can always be paradoctored.

My first return to this universe, and we end up here. This tiny, devastated moon named after the ferryman of the dead, and a ghost offers me more ghosts. Riddles, signs and symbols. They want to take me on at the game I've made my own? So be it.

Reaching into a pocket, I pull out two coins. Funnily enough, they're silver. High Tagel crowns, with Morgaine's head stamped on them. I throw them at Lesley's feet.

"If you want them back, you pay the ferryman."

I turn and walk into the TARDIS without looking at her face.

VULCAN

SEPARATION ANXIETY by SARAH HADLEY

The door opens, and as it does, the huddled figure can be seen within. Tall, thin, a vision in burgundy, the man sits hugging himself in pain and starvation, wondering what may happen next. He looks up at his jailer, who has entered the room. “How long…?”

“You have been our prisoner for thirty-six Earth rotations, with the addition of point one six one percent of the thirty seventh rota ”

“Yes!” With a sudden effort, the man cries out. “Yes…yes, I know.”

His jailer doesn’t flinch, or even blink. “The Leader will speak with you today. An audience has been scheduled to occur in point two four nine Earth rotations Apply yourself to hygienic preparations as necessary ”

“Food?”

“That is for the Leader to decide.”

“The woman…”

“You are not to be informed of her condition, or those of your ship or artificial intelligence unit.”

The man swallows “The same lines Every day No deviation from the script.”

“The Leader has ordered it.” His jailer turns and departs, sealing the door and leaving the man alone inside his perfect metal cell. The man drops his chin into one hand, knowing that there is little to do but sleep for six hours

He stares out at the perfect, unblemished metal wall as if it captivates him, although he is aware that the other three walls, the ceiling, and the floor are

all the same. He hopes in vain that sleep will come; now, more than ever, he needs to rest. He hasn't slept in thirty-seven days.

As he does each morning, the Doctor begins to cry

"Not long, Romana… nearly there, now…" The Doctor runs over the landscape, thinking quickly to avoid mines hidden under the rock and rubble. In his arms is Romana wracked by spasms and nearly unconscious, the Doctor's long scarf wrapped around her trim frame as a makeshift dressing. The Doctor is momentarily glad that his scarf is mostly red and terra cotta, masking the colour of the blood seeping from her chest; he knows, though, that the illusion won't be maintained for long… already, her pink frock coat is becoming stained.

He flies over a series of rocks, narrowly avoiding the explosion of an unstable mine. Ahead, the TARDIS is clearly visible, but to the Doctor it seems like a mountain away instead of merely a field. Trying not to think about it, he rushes on, pulling his companion close. If he doesn't hurry, she will certainly die.

In the background the Doctor hears the shouting of angry voices, the loading of guns, the quaking of ground under fire. Recalling another apocalyptic experience, he can mentally describe it… the sound of the planet screaming out its rage. Oh, wiry did he have to get involved in this petty little war? He knows why; he is the Doctor, and he rushes into conflict with no thoughts for himself. Strike that. No thoughts for himself… or anyone else.

She had not wanted to go on. He had piloted the TARDIS to come here, so she could see the beautiful sunset… more impressive than any on Earth, or Galli/rey, because of the abnormally slow rotation of the planet. They might have stood there for hours, watching as the final rays sank slowly below the horizon, but he had seen it all before. So he went exploring, and she, as always, followed him. When those final rays disappeared, she looked up and registered the sight from where she stood on a battlefield.

A moment later and she was on the ground, shot directly through her primary heart.

Allowing himself to return to the present, the Doctor finds himself before the TARDIS, and struggles to open the door without dropping Romana. Managing it, he hursts in, shouting commands to K-9 as he gently lowers his companion to the floor. K-9 slides forward, servos whirring into action.

He extends an antennae probe and reads his Mistress's life signs. "Primary heartbeat non-existent. Master, with weak pulse from secondary heart. Mistress is in shock. "K-9's voice drops slightly, as if he feels genuinely sad. "Prognosis terminal, Master."

"I know! I know!" The Doctor bends over the console, trying in vain to disconnect the randomiser.

"Estimate that life functions will have ceased by the time you complete this task and reach the nearest medical facility of appropriate technological level. Alternative suggestion: employ emergency power unit! "

"But K-9, that'll take the TARDIS completely out of Time and Space!"

"Affirmative. However, this unit, may be able to bring TARDIS back into Time/Space continuum at unspecified location. Inform that said possibility is Mistress's last, best hope.

"There's nothing for it, then; we've got to try. Prepare yourself, K-9… "As the little robot turns and engages in computer link-up with the console, the Doctor lifts the emergency power unit from a hatch and sets in place. "Ready, steady… "Out of the corner of his eye, the Doctor can see Romana convulse in pain.

"Now! "

Two Cybermen enter the control centre, gripping their prisoner by the shoulders. The CyberLeader looks on with interest, planning to make a note of this development later… the Doctor can, indeed, be weakened by his concern for others. Could the woman — another Time Lord — be his mate?

The Cybemicn drop the Doctor at their Leader's feet, and watch emotionlessly as he collapses in a burgundy heap. He's tired and worried, as close to the boundary of sanity and insanity as he has been in three regenerations. "Thank you," the Doctor whispers, his deep voice less resonant than usual. "I believe you wanted to see me? Allow me to present my card." He reaches stiffly into his jacket and pulls out a small piece of paper. "Shame that it's blank; I've always meant to get them printed on. It doesn't matter, really… I think you know who I am."

"Correct," says the Leader evenly. "You are identified as the Doctor. Time Lord of Gallifrey; defender of Earth. The Oncoming Storm."

"Yes, yes, yes and ah — no, we're only related." The Doctor grins weakly. "It's a little joke, you see. Touch of humour. Levity in a serious situation."

The Leader continues to stare impassively down at him. “Oh, never mind… Cybermen just don’t understand these things.”

“Humour is not essential to our func—”

“I don’t care,” interrupts the Doctor, impatient. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Your pursuit of a reaction to humour would indicate otherwise.”

“Listen.” The Doctor glares at the Leader as he pulls himself up. The time for fooling about is past. “I want confirmation that my friend, Romana, is all right. If she’s dead or seriously injured through your own stupid, stubborn lack of attention to ‘nonessential’ things, I warn you that I will not stop until I’ve destroyed you all. Do you understand me, CyberLeader? *Do you understand”*

“You are in no position to make threats. Doctor.” Suddenly, the Doctor laughs…the disquieting laugh of someone very tired of the universe and all he’s done for it, with little in return. He’s just taken a few more steps towards his mind’s edge. “Oh, well, CyberLeader,” he says, grinning broadly at his own mad laughter, “that’s your opinion. I hold a different theory that says you don’t understand…and that you have never, ever seen me truly angry.”

Remember. When she first met the Doctor, she had not been the same woman…quite literally. Tall and brunette, already with a penchant for the fashions which would later become so eccentric. She could look him in… well… the teeth, which is a lot more than she could do later.

Initially, she was more than sceptical of his manner and ways, but as time went on he endeared himself to her. She began to develop an acute case of self-consciousness, eventually deciding that her current form wasn’t right for these adventures, her new feelings, or the Doctor himself. So she changed it, wasting one of her own lives to fit in, to get the right reaction from the Doctor. She never regretted it.

In her newer, blonde form she was more carefree, doing as she wished and pleased by the tiniest things. The Doctor might have called her more human, and perhaps he did… to K-9, when she wasn’t in the console room, or to other humans they met… Duggan, Colonel Radlett, Chris Parsons, or Clare Keightley.

Sometimes, she wished he wouldn’t keep himself so closed up, so unwilling to show true affection. Then, she would always grin… he just wouldn’t be the Doctor otherwise, would he?

All these things run through the unconscious mind of Romana as she lies on the console floor. She can hear voices, indiscernible yet recognisable: the Doctor and K-9. Another wave of pain sweeps through her and her body arcs… but she cannot feel it. She is too busy concentrating on all her best memories.

It's all she can do. Remember.

"We will release you. Doctor…if you give us the schematics for a time-ship."

The Doctor's gaze remains steady. "Answer my question, please."

"With such a machine, the Cybermen can continue their proliferation throughout the universe. You, Doctor, will no longer be a threat to us, and may live as you choose on planet fourteen. The city will be yours to live in… forever."

"Even if I did believe you. I'd still ask you to answer my question. Go on and answer it *What have you done with Romana!"*

The CyberLeader makes a brief gesture, and one of its Cybermen crosses to the far wall, operating a control to reveal a huge viewscrcen. "Section thirty-one, leader," it says, pressing the appropriate buttons on a keypad. "Cubicle eighteen." The viewscreen's image shifts and refocuses upon a cryogenic chamber, one unit specifically.

Inside the clear, egg-shaped device, Romana's body lies frozen in an upward position. The coat and scarf have been removed, and her other clothes cut away to show some sort of internal stabiliser… a clear product of Cybertechnology… has been placed over the right side of her chest, neck, and stomach. Even seeing her like this, the Doctor can't help but smile. She's alive.

"Take me to her," he demands, turning back on the Leader. "I want to see her for myself before I agree."

"Visual confirmation is all that is necessary."

"No." The Doctor shakes his head. "That's not adequate for me. Leader, and you should know it by now."

"Very well. Doctor. Take your throat apparatus." A Cyberman steps from behind the Leader, holding the Doctor's scarf. "The temperature is significantly reduced within section thirty-one of this city."

"I'll make sure to bundle up." The Doctor takes the scarf…he doesn't need it, thanks to his stable body temperature, but he understands what this

demonstrates. He holds the upper hand, for the moment, and the Leader is letting him know it. How strange…

The Cybermen want the Doctor kept alive.

The TARDIS rocks back and forth as the emergency power unit speeds it on. The Doctor, unable to control it, is bent over Romana and trying to keep her from sliding into the wall. "K-9!" he cries. "What's happening!"

"Excessive turbulence caused by attempt to pull TARDIS back into Time/Space continuum before complete departure achieved. TARDIS is resisting and may prove too strong for combined forces of this unit and TARDIS stabilisers."

"In lay terms, K-9!"

"I'm doing the best I can, Master. Very very sorry. "

"You've got to keep trying. Don't give up now. "

"Affirmative. Priority commands?"

"Try boosting the structural compensators!"

"Structural compensators at maximum capacity, Master. Attempting to distribute excess power to secondary systems. This may assist in structural compensation."

The Doctor struggles to keep his footing. If the TARDIS can hold out just a bit longer, perhaps K-9 will be able to land them where Romana can get help…

"Attempting re-entry into Time/Space continuum now. Probability high of arrival in the star system So…"

The TARDIS explodes, shattering outwards into the Time/Space continuum. The Doctor clings to Romana, as if the sheer mass of his clothing will protect her. He remembers the last time this happened… over the Land of Fiction… and how long it took him to find his companions. It can happen this time. He has to remain conscious.

He has to remain conscious.

He has to remain—

Now he stands before her, looking up instead of down at her well-defined features. He doesn't know how the Cybermen have done it, but it really is Romana… captured like a photograph in time, living without breath, dead without loss of life. He has waited thirty-seven days to see her undisturbed by pain, and he reflects that in the cold serenity of the cryogenic chamber she seems calm, serene.

This isn't what he wants for her. He feels terrible that she'll have to go through even more pain yet, but he needs her back… and as long as the Cybermen need him, they'll do what he requests. He's calmed to know that she's all right, that she's still alive, but it makes him even more upset at what he's allowed to happen.

The Doctor steps forward, raising a hand and unconsciously tracing the outline of her face with one linger, making a menial picture of how she looks. Her blonde hair; her high cheekbones; that red waistcoat with the ladybirds on it. He is so much older than she… over five-hundred years… and although it seems impossible, he has never met someone who makes him feel so alive.

He has to make sure she wakes up again. "Romana " he says slowly, "I know I'm not very good at words, but you can't hear me so I'll talk to you anyway. I'm always using masks, the fool most of all, but… I want you to know I really do care. Yes, I do. And you may not believe it now, my girl, but I'm so terribly sorry. I didn't mean to get you hurt. When you're back up, we'll do something really wonderful, like a holiday. You'll want a holiday after all this.

"I'm not sure if you can ever forgive me, but… well, I hope you can. I'd like you to. It…yes, well, it would mean a lot to me."

He turns away, and the Cybermen start after him. At the doorway, he stops and looks back at his companion.

"I miss you, Romana."

"Partial success, Master. Current location within Earth s solar system. Suggest you wake up now." Then, with more emphasis, "Suggest you wake up immediately. Master!"

The Doctor lifts his head, wiping his face with the back of his hand. He pulls it away to find that his lip is bleeding, and that reminds him of something else. Turning over, he checks the humanoid figure wrapped in a dirty pink frock coat. Romana's still alive… just barely. Nothing of the TARDIS itself seems to have survived.

"K-9, where did you say we are?" The robot must have traced their location soon after planetfall. How long has he been unconscious?

"Penultimate planet within Earth's *solar system, Master. Local name 'Vulcan' applied upon discovery in the year 2002. Human colony will be*

established in year 2018. Mistress still in critical condition, but may survive with immediate medical attention. "

"Thank you for the status report." The Doctor realises something. "Did you just say…will be established? This isn't a human colony yet? Please tell me I'm wrong, K-9…"

"There are no humans here." A voice from above and behind them. "This planet is currently inhabited by another form of life. We will conquer this solar system and control the galaxy. "

"This woman is dying. She must have immediate medical attention." The Doctor has an idea which race he has fallen into the grasp of. He isn't pleased at the thought.

"You will be taken to our Leader. He will decide what is to be done with you."

The Doctor picks himself up, to come face-to-face with a silver giant. At the first glimpse of the teardrop eyes and familiar jug handles, he knows with whom he's dealing. He's met them before, many times, and this particular variant twice…on Earth and planet fourteen, both in the future.

The giant raises its weapon up and aims it at the Doctor s head. "We are Cybermen."

The CyberLeader walks into section thirty-one. The Doctor has been returned to his cell, his mental and emotional state apparently stabilised; he has agreed to help the Cybermen build a time-ship in return for the female's recovery. The Leader decides that she must be his mate… why else would he act so irrational? Why else would he trust his enemies, the Cybermen?

The Leader stands in front of Romana's cryogenic unit, its mind processing the data obtained from their initial scan of her body. The experiment will proceed as planned, with a success probability of fifty-seven percent…

This could prove to be the ultimate survival ofthe Cyber race.

"CyberLeader, please… "

"Cybermen do not make bargains, human. From this point forward, you will be treated as a prisoner until you are to be disposed of, or made useful as hostage. "

"But the woman… she's dying… you've got to help her. "

"You are not Leader; I will make any decisions regarding this situation. The female will also be regarded as a prisoner of the Cybermen. If she

requires medical attention it will be provided as necessary. “

Two Cybermen take hold of the Doctor s arms, dragging him back to the doorway. “No! I’ve got to make you see…” He is cut off as they finally pull him into a lift, the doors closing in front of his face.

The Leader considers. He knows this human’s appearance, and if scan results can be confirmed, the dying female is a Time Lord from Gallifrey. The attitude, however, is so different… can this really be the Doctor? If so, the Leader has complete control, as the continued existence of the woman is obviously so important to him. Gears turn. Processors click. Binary code fills the Leader s head. It begins thinking of how to finally destroy the Doctor.

For the Doctor, his thirty-eighth day opens busily. He spends the morning drawing designs for a time-ship… false ones, designed to look real but secretly containing fatal flaws… to present to the CyberLeader. When he’s satisfied with his work, the Doctor calls his jailer and asks for to be taken, somewhat cheekily, “to their Leader.”

The Leader examines the Doctor’s designs, immensely satisfied at the knowledge that it has the Doctor under its control. It realises, of course, that the Doctor must be cheating somehow… leaving small details out of the schematics, or ‘accidentally’ forgetting to align the elements correctly. That doesn’t matter at all; soon, the Doctor will see why.

Later, crouched over a portable computer terminal, the Doctor is surprised to see his cell door open. In the entryway is a slight figure, nowhere near his height, with familiar high cheekbones.

There, the resemblance ends.

She is a Cyberbeing, but not in the usual sense… her body is like a crustacean with no shell, bits of metal and flesh wrapped around wires and gears. Her hands are human, blue from the lack of circulation, knuckles tied to the cords of artificial limbs. Yet it is her… its face which disturbs the Doctor most.

The cheekbones are still there, with the full teeth and jaw. The rest is gone, save for one blue-grey ear that serves as a data port. There are no signs of eyes or nose save for empty, hollow sockets. This is all something the Time Lord has seen before, but he still finds it repulsive to look at.

“I do not believe we have met. Doctor,” says the Planner. It speaks with Romana’s voice, artificially created with a voice synthesiser. “I look

forward to a… long working relationship."

The woman the Doctor knew is dead.

The visual processors in the CyberPlanner's do not recognise the Doctor's image, yet it feels that it has spoken with the prisoner before. Perhaps…yes, it is possible that the Planner encountered him before conversion. The Planner can no longer remember that time, and if it could, would not choose to; inclusion within the Cyber race is the ultimate goal for all species. It is of no importance, anyway… doubtless any pre-conversion meeting with the Doctor was brief and insubstantial.

Recent memories slip through the Planner's brain, twisted and incoherent. A spherical object bounces off a sandy terrain, to this Earth idea of recreation, snoring in a throne of seawater defences wrong and waggle his tail, causing a loop in the dodecahedron… The memories recede farther and farther back into the subconscious, and in microseconds the Planner can no longer remember them. A new thought has occurred to it, however… the Doctor may be of some use. For now, he must live.

Two Cybermcn come up behind the Planner, aiming their weapons at the Doctor. "Now that our Planner has woken, the Doctor is to be destroyed," one slates flatly. "It is the Leader's order."

"No." The Planner raises one hand to stop them. "Tell the Leader that the Doctor is essential to our plans. He will be my personal attendant until I have completed my mission; only he knows the full workings of my pre-conversion form. I need his capabilities to ensure my survival."

The Cybcrmen hesitate at first, but soon nod their assent and go. When they have disappeared from his view, the Doctor turns his attention back to the Planner. He looks bored. "Thank you very much, but I wouldn't mind them killing me. Really. It'd make things a lot simpler."

"I did not stop them out of mercy. Doctor. I stopped them… because I need you." The Planner crouches over the Doctor's form. "Stand," it says coldly. "I will need to brief you on the specifics of the mission."

The Leader considers; should the Doctor have been allowed to live? The CyberPlanner may, indeed, need an attendant… it is the first conversion of a Gallifreyan Time Lord, and as such could prove unstable… but the Doctor is an enemy of the Cyber race, and is not to be trusted. Now that his companion is, to all intents and purposes, dead, do the Cybermen have any

sort of hold over him? Both sides of the argument are logical. The Leader may live to find it made the wrong choice…

"This is why they want you as their Planner, why I've been tricked. The Cybermen are going to invade Gallifrey." The Doctor stares up at the screen, watching the Cyberfleet form over the surface of planet fourteen. "You want Time, don't you? You want complete and total control over every living thing in the cosmos, from the tiniest amoeba to the most superior intelligence… whether they live, whether they die. whether they manage to get the last box of Milk Tray or not. You want the ability to go off and kill someone, and then come back and make sure it never happens!" The Doctor is making grand gestures, throwing his arms out as he speaks, and staring goggle-eyed at the Planner.

"Time is the worst enemy of the Cyber race. We want the absolute power that the Time Lords possess."

"Well, you won't get it," the Doctor mutters, dropping his arms to his sides. "The Time Lords will make very sure of that. And so will I."

"No." The Planner turns and, in one solid motion, has the Doctor's shoulder in its grip. It squeezes tightly, causing the Doctor to gasp in pain, and bears him slowly down to its eye level. "You are to maintain my stability; nothing else. You will not interfere with our invasion."

Mere weeks later, the Doctor stands with the Planner before an immense communications array, which takes up most of a wall. In the centre is large screen, on which the Doctor can clearly see the forms of dozens of Cyberships travelling through space. He watches it calmly, like a newsreel, but in his mind he knows the attack is real.

The Planner breaks the silence. "Approaching main target," it calls out, bent over a navigational computer. "Breaking into crescent formation at my specifications. Set to fire in about seven minutes." It pauses, and for a moment the Doctor gets the impression that it's mentally blinking "Specific correction: point zero zero five Earth rotations."

Another voice comes from beside them. "Weapons charged and ready, Mistress. Awaiting further instructions." Something like a head bobs out from a recess in the wall, attached to a long, metal extender and wired to a hidden power source. "Inform that the FleetLeader wishes to speak with you. Mistress. Suggest you give greetings and salutations."

“So that’s what you’ve done with K 9,” said the Doctor sadly “I was starting to hope he’d escaped.”

“Your mechanical creature is more functional as a tactical computer for the Cybermen.” The Planner presses a button on a small computer, once attached to K 9’s back “Do not accept transmission excepting an emergency situation. Tell the FleetLeader that all things are in order here.”

“Affirmative,” agrees K-9’s head, disappearing back into its recess.

The Planner turns to the Doctor. “I will require a final examination before the attack Request a thorough check of all brain connections, including neural function.”

The Doctor nods sullenly, beginning by lifting off her cranial covering and examining the enhanced brain. In the past few weeks, he has been allowed to examine the Planner on several occasions It certainly isn’t a stable creature; the conversion process was made specifically for adapting Terran and Mondasian forms, and as a result is unable to fully support the unique Gallifreyan physiology. It would be very easy to set off something within the Planner, something which would destroy it but the Doctor has found that he cannot. It is Romana, after all, no matter how changed.

Now, as he checks the delicate, artificial nerve system, he again considers murder; it’s his final chance to stop her before she destroys Gallifrey. He could do it very simply, scrambling the neural functions and turning Romana into little more than a living vegetable. Perhaps it would stop her from succumbing to the Planner… already, multiple personalities are emerging, as can be heard from the speech patterns. It might even give the Doctor some form of release after all this time, a sort of assisted suicide for a dying woman.

No. He can’t do it. These similes only prove it to him: he can’t kill Romana as long as some vestige of her remains, it goes against everything he believes in no matter what the consequences “There Everything accounted for.” He snaps the cranial covering back into place, wincing at the sound. “You can get back to your destruction now.” He moves away from the Planner, leans up against the wall and concentrates on his breathing

The Leader was right, after all.

“Target in range. Mistress. The Cyberfleet awaits orders.”

“Fire.”

The Doctor watches as the fleet bears down upon Gallifrey. It was so terribly clever…converting a Time Lord, and making sure they lived long enough to co-ordinate an attack on their own home planet. A Time Lord would know all the weak points, all the nooks and crannies that weren't protected by any shield or armament. Yes, it had been a brilliant idea on the part of the CyberLeader.

"I'm sorry, Romana." The Doctor stares across at the Planner. "I could've prevented all this. Instead, I've failed… to save you, to save Gallifrey, to save Time itself." He looks down at the floor glumly. "I wish you could hear me."

He looks up again, wishing in vain that Romana will be as she was, before planet fourteen.

He can't see anything.

The Doctor blinks twice, his vision slowly clearing. He is stretched out on a large, metal platform, with numerous computers and equipment arranged in a half-circle about him. As he attempts to raise himself, something pulls tightly on his skin, and he reaches up to find a multitude of electrodes attached to his forehead. Wondering where he is, the Doctor minutely shifts each of his limbs to find that they are all in perfect working order. What, then, has happened?

"Hello there," says a soft voice. "You look like you need a hand."

"Multiple ones," the Doctor agrees. "I'm not sure how many of these little gadgets are wired up, but they really have a hold on me."

"Let's see what can be done." The Doctor grins as he feels the tension on his forehead removed, electrode by electrode. "Wait a moment," he cries, "I think I know what's going on…this is a jolly party. I'm a dexterity game, and if you make a wrong move a klaxon will go off inside my head."

"Not quite, no."

"Oh. Well, failing that. I'm supposed to guess who you are." An expression of amused realisation lights his face. "Yes, I'd know those hands anywhere! It's Lillie Langtry, isn't it?"

The voice chuckles. "Don't flatter yourself." Suddenly, the figure moves into his view, a quiet smile on her face. "Hello there."

"Romana!" The Doctor jumps up, grasping her by the shoulders, "It's you."

She beams. "Yes, Doctor."

He frowns "Mmm Well, that's good, then " He turns away, rubbing his chin between his fingers. "Now the question is, where are we?"

Romana looks hurt at his lack of enthusiasm, but answers him nonetheless. "We're with the Cybermen."

"I might've guessed that, Romana "

"No," Romana attempts to explain, "It's not quite so clear. You see…" One wall of the room slides back to reveal a Cyberman. "…we're being watched."

Cyberman forty two strides into the room, immediately noting the Doctor's glum, goggle-eyed expression. "You should not be concerned. Doctor. I am here to explain matters, as I have already done with your companion."

"Really Why should I believe you?"

Romana leans forward. "Because it's a very good speaker," she says in a stage whisper.

"Oh. Well, then…" The Doctor makes a circular motion with his hand. "Go on,"

"I am the CyberExaminer," continues Cyberman forty-two, "converted especially to organise research required by the Leader. The equipment you see around you is constructed for this purpose."

"You mean you work in mind probes," the Doctor translates

"It may be called that, if you wish," the Examiner replies neutrally. "The Leader requested that I perform some amount of research upon yourself and your companion, to gauge your responses to various simulated scenarios." It pauses "My readings indicate that you have sustained no permanent mental damage, although your awareness to certain future possibilities will be temporarily heightened."

The Doctor seems surprised. "I see. So this was all a trick."

"I emphasise that this was a research procedure Your TARDIS landed here accidentally, and you were brought to me with specific commands from the Leader. You will not remember those events; I was forced to sedate you with a neural inhibitor which will have completely flushed your memory of several Earth rotations "

"Isn't this all just a bit too…complicated for a CyberLeader? Wouldn't he want to destroy me, and Romana as well?"

"The Leader's request had a low margin of probability; I did not expect such orders Yet this knowledge must be of use to the Leader, or he would

not have requested it."

"All right, all right." The Doctor is getting tired of the roundabout discussion. "What's to happen to us now, then?"

The Examiner seems to hesitate as it answers. "The Leader has decided to release you."

On the planet of Gallifrey, within the darkest offices of the Citadel, two figures are watching this conversation on a monitor. They are both clothed in the long, shiny gowns of a Chancellor, although their ceremonial collars are nowhere in sight. One, from a distance, might look plain…his fiery, deep-set eyes hid among clean-cut hair and bony features. This is Chancellor Valnar. The other man. Chancellor Rommtenst, strikes more of an impression with his high forehead and haughty, warbling voice. Together they are the joint Heads of the Celestial Intervention Agency. At the Examiner's last words, Rommtenst turns to his associate. "Your proposition was a good one, Valnar. By lifting both the Examiner and the full contents of its work area from the Timestream and into one of our isolation chambers, we have been able to test the Doctor and Lady Romanadvoratrelundar without any suspicions on their part. All that needed consideration was how to relay specific instructions as 'the Leader', and it is a simple enough thing for my technicians to send commands directly to the Examiner's computer; they are, after all, only rooms away. The whole operation has been a success."

Valnar nods in acknowledgement. "I did not think you would approve, initially. You certainly gave a negative opinion of such practices during the Omega crisis."

"The President needed assurance that the our Agency is respectful of the Laws of Time."

"The President," returns Valnar, "is dead. As is our superior, Goth, these seventy-three years."

A thin smile plays upon Rommtenst's lips. "Exactly so. It is our obligation to both their memories that we continue the Agency as it was first begun. We must protect Gallifrey… and secondarily, Time itself. Always remember these priorities, Valnar."

"To this aim," Rommtenst continues, "we have brought the Doctor and Lady Romanadvoratrelundar here, suspecting that the Timestream might be disturbed by their involvement. As we can now see, our concerns were well

warranted. It has been proved that their ability to make decisions of importance is hindered by their feelings of… affection." The Chancellor says the last word like an obscenity. "Therefore, I can see no other course of action available to us but to summon Lady Romanadvoratrelundar back to Gallifrey."

"I concur," replies Valnar simply. "I will take it up with Lord President Borusa in the next session of the High Council."

Rommtenst nods solemnly. "It is agreed. I am sorry to have made you part of this, Valnar, but the agreement of both Heads of the Agency will be needed to convince the Lord President. He must realise the importance of this, without knowing the full horror."

"Indeed. The Doctor, although an excellent agent, is expendable… while Lady Romanadvoratrelundar must survive. She is of great importance. When Logopolis is destroyed, she will play a vital role in the maintenance of the CVEs. And as for the war… "

"That is all we shall tell the Lord President."

"Yes." Valnar frowns at the thought._"He cannot be allowed to know that the future of Gallifrey.. and its Presidency… depends on her survival."

"We're going to be let go?" Romana asks, incredulously. "Just like that?"

"You will be returned to the site of your TARDIS."

"Well, thank you very much!" She climbs up onto the teleport pad, giving a smile and a mock bow to the CyberExaminer. "I'll call again, next time I want to get away from it all." She blinks, and the smile is gone. "Don't bother with waiting very long."

"No," the Doctor agrees, joining her. "I think we need a bit of holiday from hospitality."

At a signal from the Examiner, another Cyberman operates a switch, and the two Time Lords leave only an afterimage in their wake. Now they stand before the familiar blue police box, warmed by its very presence; a strong humming noise indicates that all systems are functioning normally. The Doctor begins to open the door, and then pauses.

"Romana…" he starts, stepping backwards to her side.

"Yes?"

He grins, suddenly, taking her arm in his. "That waistcoat is very nice."

"Thank you, Doctor." She grins back, and together they enter the TARDIS

Almost three centuries later, his time, a little man sits alone on the edge of a cliff is wearing a more sober ensemble than usual… tweed jacket, black trousers, burgundy waistcoat. As if in defiance, he still carries his favourite Panama hat of the past century and a half, wrapped round with a brown band.

He looks down at the waistcoat, fingering the edge with one hand. It's one of his favourite colours, red, although he can't explain why. He's seen enough of it in his time, too many bleeding bodies to count. Others might think that's why he wears it… because it reminds him of his obligations to the universe, and the people who have died to help him. He would nod softly, but in his hearts he knows there is another reason.

It seems such a good colour to die in.

He knows the time is coming soon… he has been in this body so long, longer even than his fourth, that death seems not far ahead. He can feel it inside, so he wears red to prepare himself, and secretly hopes it will help disguise the blood. His own blood.

He remembers the last time he was not surprised by his own death. It's been a long time, but one thing still remains lodged in his mind… she wasn't there. He had wanted her to be there, but she had found her place in the universe, and he let her go. She never knew the truth.

They had met again, twice, with him stuck in this form, so different from the one she last knew. She was the same small, blonde-haired woman as ever. Now, however, she is president of all Gallifiey… and hasn't time for adventures.

Maybe, one day…

Leaves crunch as his companion walks up behind him. "Doctor?" the young man asks. "Are you okay? You've been here for hours."

The Doctor nods, silently, and picks himself up off the ground. "I'm ready now." He turns and leads the way back to the TARDIS… to see her, just one last lime.

Behind him, the last rays of sunset have disappeared. Centuries before, on the same spot, two Time Lords walked arm in arm to their respective destinies They are gone now, but he will remember them.

The memory makes him smile.

CASSIUS

WATCHING YOU, WATCHING US, WATCHING YOU by JAMES POTTER

“ The undiscovered remains of a lost civilisation a plain tilled with brightly-coloured jewels and crystals… or even prehistoric monsters!”

“Och, it’s just a load of rocks.”

The Doctor sighed and turned to his young Scots friend. “Yes. Jamie. But imagine what might be behind them, just over the next rise,” lie gestured vaguely at the scanner monitor behind him.

Jamie remained unconvinced. He knew the Doctor too well to get caught up in his child-like excitement. It often led him — and therefore Jamie — into all sorts of trouble

“Anyway, there’s nothing ‘just’ about rocks,” the Doctor admonished, waggling a finger. “I used to have quite an extensive rock collection.

I imagine it’s still in the TARDIS, somewhere ” He gazed uncertainly at the doorway leading further into the ship.

“Why did you give it up?” Jamie asked The Doctor gave him a smile and patted the back pocket of his moth-eaten trousers. “Pins are more interesting.”

The third member of the group, Zoe, wrinkled her nose at the sight on the monitor and leaned back against the console. “Well I agree with Jamie. It looks dull and lifeless.” Her voice carried the unmistakable tones of someone who knew that they were right.

Jamie waved at Zoe, making *there you go, what did I tell you?* noises

The Doctor straightened in indignation.

"Well, you two kill-joys can stay in here if you like," he declared loftily, "I am going out. What are the readings please, Zoe?"

Zoe glanced at the control panel behind her. "One quarter gravity; a thin atmosphere made up of sodium, helium, hydrogen, potassium and a tiny amount of oxygen."

"Then I shall go and put on a suit." The Doctor made for the inner door. He paused and turned. "What about the temperature?"

"Ninety-three degrees above absolute zero."

Jamie groaned inwardly. "But what are ye going to do out there anyway?"

"I shall look at rocks," the Doctor replied facetiously, before striding out the door, coat tails flapping behind him.

Zoe walked over to Jamie, her eyes watching the diminutive figure depart down the corridor.

We're going to go with him, aren't we?" she asked despairingly, already knowing the answer.

Jamie sighed. "Aye."

The two suited-up companions watched their strange friend bound across another small crater.

"Doctor!" Jamie called, the suit transmitter scratching away at his voice. "Can ye not slow down?" The figure ahead slowed to a halt, turned, and made a big gesture with its arm.

"Well do come along then," the Doctor told them, "If I waited for you I'd be here all day." He jumped up and down, sending himself a couple of metres into the air before bounding ahead again.

Jamie turned to look at Zoe. With the goggles over her eyes and the large transparent dome over her head, she looked like she was swimming in a goldfish bow! "Where does he think he's going anyway? There's nothing here."

Zoe attempted to shake her head. "You know the Doctor, Jamie," she told him, "He'd find something even on a desolate piece of rock." She started to take large strides, catching up with their fried.

Jamie raised his arms in despair. "But this is a desolate piece of rock!"

The Doctor fought his way up the edge of the crater. It had been getting steeper, but the low gravity meant that it wasn't such an effort to haul

himself up. All the same, he had to pause to get his breath back when he reached the top.

He stood at the summit and looked down behind him. In the distance he could just make out the shape of the TARDIS, it's blue edges only just visible. A fair distance away, Jamie and Zoe were slowly making their way towards him. It was hard to make out much detail, the rock seemed reluctant to reflect the sunlight. Not that there was any. The nearest star that the Doctor could see was millions of miles away, a bright speck amongst a dark sky of other specks. The thin atmosphere made the stars shine so much brighter, and he gazed up at them for what seemed like ages, happy just to observe the infinite expanse of the universe. Eventually, the Doctor chuckled appreciatively and turned to see what was ahead, on the other side of the crater rim.

A rocky plain lead down to a surface more or less the same as the one behind him. Except for a large, reflective structure, no more than a few kilometres away. It had obviously been put there, and appeared to be quite new. The giant dish of a radio telescope sat on its roof. As he made his way down the other side of the crater's edge and approached the structure, it resembled more and more a prefabricated building of some description, covered in multi-atmospheric plating. The telescope dish was even bigger than he'd first thought, and he could see motors, no bigger than his fist, all working together, all keeping it slowly moving with its target. As for the building itself, there was what looked like windows in the walls, and he could possibly make out an airlock of some sort.

When he was close enough to touch, the Doctor confirmed his suspicions: it was an airlock. There was a window set into the door, the view inside shrouded in darkness. His gloved hand tapped on the transparency. "Hello?" he called, his voice carried on a radio wave. "Is there anyone at — oh dear."

Through the material of his suit, the Doctor could feel something being prodded into his back. Something round and pointy and probably rather dangerous. Examining his reflection in the window, he could see another suited figure directly behind him. It wasn't Zoe or Jamie.

Reluctantly, and with a long face, the Doctor raised his hands.

"Jamie! Zoe! There you are!"

The Doctor got up from the large couch and approached his two friends, arms outstretched. "Doctor!" Zoe ran up and hugged him. Her suit had been

removed, as had Jamie's, and she was now back in her glittery jump-suit number. Jamie was, as always, in his kilt.

"So this is where ye got to." Jamie nodded at his old friend, just as pleased to see him as Zoe, but less enthusiastic about showing it.

"When we saw you go over the top of the ridge, we climbed up after you as soon as we could," Zoe explained, untangling herself. "But when we reached the top you'd gone."

"Aye," Jamie butted in, "We saw this place and came looking, then one of this lot pointed a gun at us and brought us inside."

The Doctor frowned. "Yes, they did that to me, too. Odd, isn't it?"

"Why?"

"Because these people are no more native to this planet than we are, Jamie." The Doctor indicated that they should sit down on the couch.

The room was large and vaguely circular. A few pictures — mostly exotic, alien landscapes — hung on the walls. A glass coffee table sat in the centre of the room, surrounded on one side by a deep blue, three-piece suite, all made of an inflated, spongy material. The seats faced a stretch of wall, or more precisely faced a large, wide screen that took up most of that stretch of wall; small speaker units could be seen tucked discretely away at either side of the room. The screen itself was dead.

Upon hitting the couch, Zoe immediately lay back and made herself comfortable. "Who are they? Do you know?"

The Doctor nodded. "Oh yes, I asked. They're Lancheeni and there's only two of them in this whole base."

"Well, what do these… Lancheeni want?"

A sigh. "Oh, I don't know Jamie. I didn't ask them that."

"Maybe you can now." Zoe nodded at the door.

Two suited, humanoid figures entered the room. The material of their garments reflected the spotlights dotted around the ceiling. The suit helmets were spherical and also reflective, eerily throwing back an image of the Doctor and his friends as they sat on the couch and watched the figures in apprehension.

The figure on thie left was still brandishing the ray gun that had threatened the Doctor earlier. It was waved about a bit, before going into a holster on the figure's leg.

"Sorry about this," a tinny voice apologised, the vowels sounding slightly strangled. "Can't be too careful."

“You could have been anyone,” the one on the right added. It then raised its arms and removed the helmet. The face behind the mirror was basically human. The mouth was a little too wide, the lips a little too thin, the eyes a little too round, but these would only have given the game away if someone looked very closely. There was an untidy mess of blondish hair on the top, completing the virtually human picture. It was also hard to tell what sex — if any — the person was. The face suggested erring on the side of masculinity, but didn’t quite convince.

The Doctor took all of this in as best he could, but it was a little difficult as the person was staring right at him.

Not the group, but him. Alone.

The Doctor coughed uncomfortably.

“Erm… how do you do?” he asked slowly.

The one on the left uncovered its head, revealing similar features to the other, except the hair was more of a brown colour. Noticing his (?) companion’s behaviour, he (?) leaned across.

“What’s the problem?” he (?) hissed.

The other broke his (?) gaze and turned. “Do you think it’s really him?” he (?) whispered.

The first sighed and rolled his (?) eyes. He (?) turned back to the Doctor and his friends.

“How do you do? My name is Dolphe.” He (?) indicated him (?) self. “And this is my friend Mumil.” He (?) indicated his (?) fair-haired companion, who was now obviously trying *not* to look at the Doctor. “And I think, to save confusion, you had better think of us as being males.”

The Doctor’s eyebrows raised. “Oh. Thank you.”

Their two hosts sat down on the remaining chairs.

There was a pregnant pause.

“So who are you then?” Jamie demanded.

“Ah!” Dolphe raised a hand. “How very remiss of us. We are Lancheeni.”

“Oh,” Jamie replied, not wanting to point out that he already knew that. “Aye.”

“What are you doing here?” Zoe asked, “This isn’t your world, is it?”

The two Lancheeni laughed politely.

“No no no.” Dolphe shook his head. “No, we’re just here on holiday.”

Jamie was incredulous. “On holiday? Here?”

“It’s the perfect place to get away from it all,” Mumil piped up, “Complete relaxation, no distractions —”

“Apart from the transmissions picked up by the radio telescope on the roof,” the Doctor completed, pointedly.

“Oh that’s just for communicating with home,” Dolphe told him, “You know, like postcards and things.”

The Doctor nodded. “Oh yes, of course.” He turned slightly and gave Zoe a look she instantly recognised. He didn’t believe a word of it.

“And yourself?” Mumil prompted.

“Ah,” the Doctor replied slowly, “I’m the Doctor and this is Jamie… and Zoe.” He waved at his friends. The two Lancheeni nodded in greeting. “We’re travellers, on our way to a nearby system.”

“We wouldn’t have stopped at all,” Zoe explained, “Except the Doctor wanted to stretch his legs.” She grinned. “He finds all this travel tiring, don’t you?”

“Yes,” the Doctor conceded as politely as possible, “Thank you, Zoe.”

“And he’s not as young as he was,” Jamie added.

“Yes!” The Doctor’s voice raised slightly higher than he intended. “Thank you, Jamie,” he added, more calmly.

“You’re perfectly welcome to stay here until you’re fully rested, aren’t they Dolphe?” Mumil turned, rather eagerly, towards his companion.

“Yes, of course you are.” Dolphe nodded in agreement.

“Oh thank you very much.” The Doctor grinned and patted his hands together. “That’s very good of you.”

“It’s nothing,” Mumi! told him happily, rising from his chair. “Come, I’ll show you to your rooms.”

As they moved through the building, Mumil explained that it was a multi-person holiday habitation, available for rent by a party of up to ten, hence the large number of rooms.

“Do you often holiday on deserted planets?” Zoe had asked.

Mumil explained that, due to over-crowding on Lancheen, there was nothing his people liked more than solitude and a bit of peace and quiet.

The Lancheeni had shown them to a set of three, conjoined rooms. All were quite spacious, all featured double beds made of the same comfortable material as the three-piece suite in the viewing room and all looked out onto

the surface of the planet-wide windows presenting a panorama of dark rock and stars.

"If you get hungry at all, the kitchen unit is up the corridor." Mumil then made his excuses and left.

The three friends sat on the Doctor's bed and considered the situation.

"What do you think they're really doing here, Doctor?"

The Doctor frowned and scratched his head. "I don't know, Zoe."

"They're not on holiday, then?"

The Doctor shook his head. "No, I don't think so, Jamie. Unless we're very close to their home planet, the apparatus on the roof isn't nearly advanced enough to send and receive interplanetary messages at a practical speed."

Zoe leant her chin on her hand as she thought. "It's a radio telescope, isn't it Doctor?"

"Yes, that's right Zoe. Used for receiving radio emissions from space."

"But it's an Earth model and design, obviously," Zoe continued, "So what do they want with it?"

"I'm afraid I don't know that either, Zoe," the Doctor admitted, "But I think we should find out."

"Why?" Jamie asked.

"Because otherwise we won't know, will we?" the Doctor answered patiently and got up from the bed. "Jamie — you're hungry'."

Jamie lowered a hand to his stomach, contused. "I am?"

"Of course you are," the Doctor told him, "You always are. I think you should go the kitchen and get something hot inside you."

"You do?"

"Oh yes." The Doctor lowered his voice. "And if you can keep Mumil or Dolphe occupied then all the better."

Realisation spread its way across Jamie's face. "Oh, I see. And what'll you two be doing?"

"I shall be examining that dish."

"What about me, Doctor?" Zoe got off the bed.

"Ah yes, you can do what you usually do so well, Zoe my dear." The Doctor smiled. "Poke your nose around and be a nuisance." He turned back to Jamie. "Is there anyone in the corridor outside?"

Jamie moved across to the door and slid it slowly aside. He poked his head out, looked around, then withdrew. "All clear," he told them.

The Doctor walked over. “Oh good. Then you’d best try to find the kitchen, Jamie.”

Jamie made to leave. “What if no one’s there?”

“Then try to find them,” the Doctor instructed, “Tell them you don’t how to work the microwave, or something.”

“Aye.” Jamie stopped and frowned. “Eh?”

The Doctor bustled him away. Once Jamie had disappeared down the corridor, Zoe left, heading in a different direction.

Finally, certain that his friends were long gone, the Doctor moved quietly away.

Back in the viewing room, Mumil was laying idly on the couch. A remote control was in his hands and his eyes were concentrating on the big screen on the far wall. The rooms lights were off, the lights from the screen playing across his face. The volume was low, to avoid attracting attention.

Mumil mouthed the words he saw on the screen. Frowning, he pointed the remote at the set and wound the picture back.

“That’s not right,” he muttered and tried again.

And again.

Frustrated that he couldn’t get it right, he switched the screen off, rose from the couch and left the room in darkness.

The Doctor made his cautious way along the plain corridors, hoping that he was headed in the direction of the telescope dish.

lie paused as he heard soft footsteps approach and quickly scuttled back round a previous comer. He carefully pecked around the edge of the wall.

It was Dolphe. He walked past and down the passageway.

“You won’t mind if I tag along will you, there’s a good fellow?” the Doctor murmured as he crept after him.

Jamie had found the kitchen easily enough but, to his frustration, couldn’t find any food. There was what looked like a fridge in the comer of the room. Now, the Doctor had told him about fridge’s. They kept food cold, which made it better because it kept the wee beasties away. But this fridge didn’t store meat, or bread or cheese or anything else the young Scot might have recognised. All it contained were packets of off-white, waxy blocks. Jamie eyed them warily, reminded of the emergency food rations he’d sampled on Dulkis. If aliens were so clever, he wondered, how come they

wouldn't know a decent bit of roast pork even if the pig got up and told them?

"Need any help?"

Jamie turned at the voice. It was Mumil, standing in the doorway,

"How long have you been there?" Jamie demanded, concerned that he'd made a fool of himself.

"I.ong enough to see that you need a hand," Mumil told him and joined Jamie at the fridge.

"No," Jamie protested, "It's not that, it's just the layout of your kitchen's… confusing."

Mumil smiled. "It's all right," he assured him, "I quite understand." He reached into the fridge and retrieved one of the packets.

"These don't look like much," he said, waving it at Jamie, "But they taste just like the real thing."

"What real thing?" Jamie asked, confused.

Mumil laughed. "Whatever you want. Look, these hold all the basic nutritional requirements, right?" He moved over to a machine on the other side of the room. Pulling open the door, he placed the unwrapped block inside. "But when you put it in here, you add whatever flavour you like." He shut the door.

Jamie nodded. It was like a simple version of the TARDIS food machine, he realised. "Roast pork." he demanded.

Mumil's eyes narrowed.

"You know," Jamie told him, "Meat. Cooked over a fire."

Mumil nodded in understanding and flicked a set of switches that were set into the wall.

The machine started to hum.

"It'll take a moment," Mumil told him.

They stood there for a little while, in silence.

The machine finished humming and emitted a series of beeps. Mumil removed the block and presented it to Jamie, who eyed it suspiciously.

"Go on," Mumil said, "I'm afraid I don't know what this 'pork' tastes like, but I think you'll like this." Jamie took a bite. His mouth filled with the aromas, textures and flavours of a rather exotic meat, cooked in its own juices. It had a natural spiciness and a fibrous quality, as if he was pulling it straight off the bone with his teeth. He nodded in appreciation.

"It's good," he said indistinctly.

“All right. Now you do something for me.” Mumil’s eyes had widened in anticipation.

Jamie stopped eating. “What?”

“Do that thing you do,” Mumil asked.

“Eh?” Jamie frowned.

“You know,” Mumil told him, “That battle-cry.”

“What?” Jamie backed away.

“Please?”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No,” Jamie told him, “Look, I only do that when I fight.” He backed away to the door, pulled it open and left the kitchen behind him as he walked quickly away.

Zoe had found what appeared to be some sort of office — a bare room save for a potted plant and a desk and chair. The desk held a computer terminal and a keyboard; it didn’t take Zoe long to discover how to log on and she was soon examining the files. Alongside one or two games, many of the files were documents, reports containing a number of statistics and invoices. Many seemed to refer to a contract, so she went through the system looking for the relevant file. The document she was looking for was tucked away in a discrete sub-directory filed under the word ‘legal’.

It was a contract between the two Lancheeni, Dolphe and Mumil (referred to in the contract as ‘agents’) and a company or group called Megriarch. It detailed procedures for the two agents to amass ‘protected data’ for export to Megriarch member systems, in return for expenses and standardised fees, stressing the need for the owners of the ‘protected data’ to be unaware of the operation.

So, the Lancheeni weren’t on holiday after all, the Doctor had been right. Zoe scanned down the rest of the document, hoping to find a passage that referred to the holders of the ‘protected data’.

It didn’t name them as a race, but it did name their planet.

It wasn’t long before Dolphe had led the Doctor to the control centre for the radio dish. A palm-scan lock controlled the door. Dolphe held his right hand against the scanner and the door slid open for him. Dolphe walked inside and the Doctor, deciding to take a gamble, quickly nipped in after him before it had time to close. The control room wasn’t particularly impressive

— the walls were covered in numerous computer banks and terminals. A couple of large block-like servers stood in the centre of the floor and the Doctor hid behind these as he spied on Dolphe's activities.

The Lancheeni had made for a computer terminal on the far wall that was outputting to a large screen which hung above it. This terminal didn't seem right, somehow. It took the Doctor a few moments to realise that the computer Dolphe was currently operating was alien in design, as opposed to the other banks in the room which were obviously of Earth origin. He pondered on why exactly they would need to do this, leaning closer to look over Dolphe s shoulder.

As Dolphe tapped in a few commands, the screen came alive. It showed a montage of motion pictures, each scene no longer than a second or two.

An armed fighterjet taking off from an aircraft-carrier; soldiers on manoeuvres; a bustling street; a man with a gun; a surgeon opening up a patient; a student demonstration; a missile launch…

Sound accompanied each clip, but for no more than a brief moment and the Doctor was hard-pressed to make out anything resembling words, hearing nothing but a jumble of noises. There was no denying the fact that the people in the pictures were humans, however. Satisfied, Dolphe quit the picture stream and shut the viewer off. The Doctor shrank back against one of the server units as Dolphe crossed to the door and left the room.

The Doctor waited until he was sure that the Lancheeni had left, then came out from his hiding place and examined the computer systems. A moment's playing with the alien system reactivated the screen and brought up a real-time image of a solar system, the orbiting planets spinning slowly around the sun at the centre. The sun itself was a fiery yellow — large, but not the biggest star the Doctor had ever seen. Fairly unremarkable really.

The third planet from the star was highlighted. The Doctor selected it and zoomed in. A sphere of flowing blues and greens, it's white clouds drifting across the surface, the Earth was instantly recognisable. The Doctor's eyes narrowed as a million possibilities raced through his mind. Pulling the image back, he followed a line that terminated at Earth, following it outwards to the origin point. The line started with a planet at the very outer limits of the solar system, obviously the planet they were currently on. The Doctor counted how many planets were between it and the sun. A conclusion reached, the Doctor carefully shut down the terminal and left the room.

“Just wait till you hear what I’ve found,” Zoe told them back in the Doctor’s room.

“You found something?” the Doctor asked, his fingers fidgeting. “Oh good, well done Zoe.”

The two men sat on the bed and listened, Jamie finishing the remain of his meal.

“Dolphe and Mumil have got a contract with some thing called Megriarch.” Zoe was almost tripping over her words in her haste to get them out “They’re supposed to spy on a target and collect information, then send it all to Megriarch, who then pays them. And you’re never going to believe who the target is, it’s —”

“Earth,” the Doctor interrupted, not without a little smugness.

Zoe straightened “How do you know?” she demanded

The Doctor gave his friend an apologetic smile. “I had a good look at that dish system,” he explained, “It’s pointed directly at Earth.” He gestured around them. “This is Cassius.”

Zoe frowned “Cassius?”

The Doctor nodded. “Oh yes, it’s a planet on the very outer edge of your solar system, Zoe. They hadn’t discovered it yet in your time. It tends to keep itself hidden away behind the others.”

Jamie poked the bed with his finger, punctuating his words “Which makes it perfect for spying on Earth.”

“Oh absolutely. They’ve got all sorts of monitoring equipment keeping an eye on the Earthlings, they can call up instant images of any place around the world ” The Doctor looked at Zoe “They must use the radio telescope to receive Earth transmissions, such as radio.”

Zoe stared into space as she worked out the consequences. She looked up at the Doctor in shock. “But that means they could have information about every single army on Earth!”

“Yes, I’m rather afraid it does,” the Doctor replied, his mouth turned downwards.

Jamie leapt off the bed, every muscle suddenly tense. “You mean they’re planning to invade?”

“Not the Lancheeni, Jamie,” the Doctor said, jumping up and waving at his young friend to sit down again. “But quite possibly this… Megriarch. Did *you* find out anything?”

Jamie thought back to his odd encounter with Mumil in the kitchen and told the others what had happened. “They must have seen us while they were spying on Earth,” he concluded.

“Of course!” Zoe exclaimed, “That’s why Mumil seemed to recognise you Doctor!”

“Yes,” the Doctor replied hesitantly, worriedly nibbling on a finger.

“What are we going to do?”

The Doctor flapped his arms in anguish. “I don’t know, Zoe!”

“Why don’t we just smash it all up?” Jamie suggested, “There’s only two of ‘em.”

The Doctor looked tempted for a moment before shaking his head. “No, that’s no good. We don’t know how strong they are. Besides, they’ll just repair the equipment if it is that important.”

He let out a heavy sigh.

“They seem like very reasonable people,” the Doctor said slowly, “I think we should confront them with what we know.”

He was immediately drowning in vociferous protests. “And what if they don’t give in?” Jamie demanded. The Doctor opened his hands in a placating manner. “Then I shall report them to the nearest authority.”

Zoe scowled. “But Doctor, you know you can never get the TARDIS anywhere you want to go.”

“I think,” the Doctor retorted, bridling, “that you underestimate my abilities.” He walked to the door. “Now come along.”

Dolphe and Mumil were sitting, relaxed, on the chairs when the travellers reached the viewing room.

“Doctor.” Mumil sat forward when they entered. “Please, sit down. I can get you a drink if you want one…”

The Doctor held up a hand. “Thank you, no. We’d like a few questions asked, if you don’t mind.”

Jamie nodded. “Aye.”

Dolphe looked at them, no particular emotion registering on his face. “Of course.”

“What would you like to know?” Mumil asked.

“The dish on the roof,” the Doctor started, “Why is it pointed at Earth?”

Mumil and Dolphe exchanged a glance.

“And who’s Megriarch?” Zoe butted in.

The Doctor flapped at her "Let them answer first, Zoe "

Mumil coughed. Dolphe sat on the edge of his chair. "We were hoping that you wouldn't ask about that," Dolphe told them.

"Ah!" Jamie exclaimed, "So ye admit you're up to something."

Mumil nodded, his eyes fixed to a small patch of floor "Yes, we are "

"I knew it!" Jamie gripped the Doctor's arm. The Doctor yelped. "They've been learning all sorts of secrets about Earth's armies!"

Mumil looked shocked. "We haven't!"

"You can't deny it " Zoe's voice held tones of supreme authority "The Doctor saw you spying on Earth, watching them at work. Probably judging tile level of Earth technology, weren't you?"

Dolphe shook his head. "We *know* the level of Earth's technology. It's nowhere near as advanced as ours "

"And you sent this information to Megriarch," Zoe stated.

"We do send material to Megriarch Mumil started. "Right, well are ye going to stop?" Jamie stood in front of them and folded his arms.

"If you don't," Zoe warned, "We'll tell the first galactic authority we come into contact with and you'll have to suffer the consequences."

A tense pause.

Dolphe nodded. "Then you'd better tell them."

"Right " Jamie wheeled and headed for tiie door Zoe followed him "Come on. Doctor. We're putting our suits back on and getting out of here."

The Doctor stood still, a frown on his face and his hands close to his chest. A solitary index finger described small circles in the air. His eyes narrowed. "You mean we're free to go?"

Dolphe nodded.

"No threats," the Doctor enquired, "No tying us up, throwing us in the cellar, that sort of thing?"

Dolphe shook his head "Wouldn't dream of it "

The Doctor beamed and clapped his hands. He laughed.

"Oh good, in that case we shall be off. Goodbye!" With a jaunty wave, the Doctor left the room after his two friends.

Dolphe looked over at Mumil Mumil looked back at Dolphe and raised an eyebrow. Dolphe shrugged.

"Do you suppose they'll do it?"

Dolphe and Mumil watched the three space- suited figures hop their way across the barren Cassian landscape. Mumil pressed his face up against the glass, watching until the travellers could no longer be seen.

Dolphe left the window and returned to his chair. “What? Report us?”

Mumil fell into the couch. “Yes. I mean, it could cause problems.”

Dolphe waved dismissively and indicated the large viewing screen. “I don’t think so. Put something on, will you?”

Mumil dragged himself up and walked over to the wall behind them.

“All right,” Dolphe continued, “So, they report us for spying on the humans, that’s fair. But no one’s going to believe that it’s for an invasion. Nobody does that sort or thing any more.”

Mumil tapped the wall. It slid up into the ceiling, revealing a storage space full of plastic cases. “Megriarch isn’t going to be too happy about this, though,” he pointed out, “It could still be punished for breach of copyright.”

Dolphe scoffed. “So we scramble our transmissions, lie low for a while… Anyway I *still* don’t think that’s a problem. It’s not as if it’s top-secret information. I don’t think anyone’s really bothered.”

Having scanned the boxes, Mumil zeroed in and pulled a box off the shelf. Moving across to the player — a small unit set into the wall underneath the screen — he prised the box open and removed the memory cartridge inside.

“What’s that?” Dolphe asked.

Mumil showed him. “I thought it would be appropriate,” he explained. He contemplated the small plastic box, a melancholy feeling building within.

“You know, it’s sad,” he said, “but you’re right. I don’t think anyone on Earth *would* care about these.”

He picked idly at the label. On it, written with something akin to a felt-tip pen, was a simple legend:

THE POWER OF THE DALEKS
(EPISODES 1-6)

YOU HAVE BEEN READING…

A confirmed Pertwee/UNIT-era fan, ***James Ambuehl*** is still quite new to DOCTOR WHO and is also a longtime Lovecraftian, with some of that work professionally published — but he's quickly learning not to mention Lovecraft/Cthulhu in DOCTOR WHO circles and DOCTOR WHO in Lovecraft/Cthulhu circles. It's a shame, too, because then he can't tell you about his appearance in Chaosium's "The Ithaqua Cycle" anthology (and the upcoming "Tsathoggua" and "Yig Cycles" as well) — or for that matter, his 'HPL meets the Master' story in "Perfect Timing "

E. A. Blair is terrible at keeping to deadlines and will do anything to avoid them. For this anthology he was eventually tied to a chair and forced to watch reruns of "Dallas" until he agreed to finish what he'd started. The editors are concerned that this may have leaked into the finished story.

Some things people have said about ***Ian J. Carter*** "Complete git " James Potter; "Doesn't get his knob out like Ewan McGregor" — Duncan; "Lover of women. Loved by men." — Greg R. Yeates; "The kind of bad breath bullfighters would rather admit their latent gay tendencies than face." Martin Robinson; "Ouch, stop punching me!" Greg R Yeates; "The best fun I never had." — Quentin Crisp; "Should have been Bond. I think the English are great! " — Sean Connery.

Martin Day was bom in Somerset, and educated there and in London, where he took a degree in English and Film Studies. He spent two years as Correspondence Editor on the Guinness Book of Records ("No, we don't have a record for sitting in a bath full of baked beans any more…"), pitching an idea for a TV reference book to the editors at every given opportunity (including in the Gents urinals). The end result was "The Guinness Book of Classic British TV" by Cornell, Day and Topping

Since then he's written or co-written eleven further books and novels, and has recently made the switch to scriptwriting, with some episodes for Channel 5's soap "Family Affairs".

He married Helen, a doctor, in 1991, and her income has subsequently kept them solvent. Just. They have lived in Leicestershire, Gibraltar and

Dorset, but have settled back in Somerset with their two daughters, Emily and Charlotte.

John S. Drew has been a doorman, library assistant, waiter, bartender, restaurant manager, hostage negotiator and creator of some of the best chicken and pasta dishes east of the Mississippi River. In his spare time, John crafts stories that he hopes somebody will enjoy. His previous credits include "Moving Day" in the "Untold Tales of Spider-Man" anthology; "Meltdown" and "Star Traders: Mission to Aranus", two audio adventures by ART Productions, "Justin Time: Private Investigator" for WBAI radio and various DOCTOR WHO audio dramas for Everlasting Films. For the year 2000, John's new audio anthology series, "The Old Curiosity Shop" will be available on the Internet as a service to the blind.

Helen Fayle, RADW "Babe of the Year 1999", co-editor of the annual Pro/Fan Charity short story collection "Perfect Timing," Nottingham inhabitant, cat owner and excellent horsewoman. Can't think of anything witty for author bios, so just settles for telling people that all rumours on the internet to the contrary, she isn't really a red-leather wearing dominatrix. She has, however, to admit that she did indeed write a novel length sequel to the film "Labyrinth" in a moment of madness. What's scary is the fact that it's up for an award for Best Story of 1999 on the forum it was posted to…

D. Paul Griggs is a some time fanzine editor and is also responsible for the BBV ONLINE website. He lives in Colchester and splits his time between his various (currently unpaid) media commitments and acting as a full-time house husband. He is married to Helen and has a son, Alexander, who was born the day **after** the 35th Anniversary of DOCTOR WHO, much to his father's intense relief.

Sarah Hadley is, without a doubt, the youngest author in this book. She lives in Tennessee, USA, and will soon be featured in the reprint of "Perfect Timing", as well as in her own anthology fanzine, "The Thirteen Crimes of Doctor Who".

She eats far too much pasta and watches far too many old films and television series, which have given her a healthy disdain of mainstream

audiences. That's ok… they don't like her much, either.

Bom in hell, ***Leigh Hooper*** was cast out after a coup de gras went disastrously wrong. He lived in the New Forest and was raised by foxes (as a result he is very cunning). He has slept in the hobo jungle and roamed a thousand miles of track, he is fluent in six million forms of communication and is available for weddings and bar mitzvahs. His name is a killing word on Arakkis. To him everyday is like Sunday. Oh, and he writes Doctor Who stories with his friend.

Richard Jones was so impressed during his research into Transhumanism that he immediately cast off flesh and uploaded his selfhood into the nearest viable receptacle. Since that happened to be a Tamagotchi then the new Richard has done nothing for the past four months except make little purring noises and demand attention. Friends and family have yet to notice the change.

Paul Leonard has written a few books, but not a biog.

Iris Wildthyme would like to say that her official ghost-writer and biographer ***Paul Magrs*** is a really altogether nice chap who works very hard at being a lecturer in Norwich and could she now be paid for all her stories that he has plagiarised under the titles "The Scarlet Empress", "The Blue Angel" and "Verdigris." Oh… apparently he's written some "real" novels as well…

Jon de Burgh Miller is the co-writer of possibly the last of Virgin's New Adventures novel series, 'Twilight of the Gods', and as such sometimes feels like the mighty Atlas, weighed down by the responsibility of the job. One of the side effects of the brief lapse of judgment that made Virgin let him write a book has been a vast increase in Jon's fan fiction output, much to his bemusement.

On the rare occasions when Jon isn't writing fiction, he spends his time designing web sites and writing articles for such august publications as "The Official Xena Magazine". He also edits the much delayed fanzine "Little Green Blobs", co-edited the legendary "Yaffle Phd.", gets far too drunk each month at the Fitzroy Tavern, and (is (to his continual surprise) still single.

When asked to submit a brief biography of himself ***Lance Parkin*** suggested that the editors make something up that was “short and pithy.”

At least we think he said “pithy.”

Mark Phippen is one of the creators and original editors of “Perfect Timing”, the breakthrough fan and professional short story collection published in 1998. He also runs the Doctor Who News Page on the internet, writes for the Friends of Doctor Who magazine, and fights a daily struggle with his addiction. Against all the odds, Mark is married to Lesley and has two children, Tessa and Ryan.

In 1992, ***James Potter*** came third in the International James Potter Competition, losing to a lady chef and a stoat from Belgium (the stoat came first, winning a lucrative potato- endorsement contract). Being a Doctor Who fan from birth, he has no understanding of the term ‘normal’ and it was his love of the programme that inspired him to start writing. An actor/writer/presenter, he has done none of these things professionally but would like someone to ask him to.

Gregg Smith... Camping attraction, available for parties, all offers considered.

From the scorched surface of Mercury to the forgotten worlds of Vulcan and Cassius, *Tales of the Solar System* brings together professional and fan *Doctor Who* writers in a selection of stories sending the Doctor and his friends to the many worlds of Earth's solar system.

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There are a billion stories in the Solar System and these are only a few...

Edited by D. Paul Griggs, this collection is published to raise money for the Motor Neurone Disease Association and the Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths and features stories by James Ambuehl, E. A. Blair, Ian J. Carter, Martin Day, John S. Drew, Helen Fayle, Sarah Hadley, Richard Jones, Paul Leonard, Paul Magrs, Jon de Burgh Miller, Lance Parkin, Mark Phippen & Leigh Hooper, James Potter and Gregg Smith.